Who Saves the Hero (AU Version)
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/12421671.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: F/F
Fandom: Mass Effect Trilogy
Relationship: Female Shepard/Liara T'Soni (past)
Character: Female Shepard (Mass Effect), Tela Vasir, Tevos (Mass Effect), Miranda Lawson, Normandy Crew, Jeff "Joker" Moreau, Original Asari Character(s), Original Human Character(s), Jack | Subject Zero, Jacob Taylor, Original Prothean Character(s), Gru (Mass Effect), Karin Chakwas, EDI (Mass Effect), Sparatus (Mass Effect), Valern (Mass Effect), David Anderson, Sha'ira (Mass Effect), Liara T'Soni
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Worldbuilding, Alternate Universe - Science Fiction, Character Development, Drama & Romance, Action/Adventure, Dom/sub Play, Xenophilia, Interspecies Relationship(s), Spiritual
Series: Part 2 of Who Saves the Hero - (AU Version)
Stats: Published: 2017-10-19 Updated: 2019-05-12 Chapters: 25/? Words: 178098

Who Saves the Hero (AU Version)
by Kudara

Summary

Rewrite of my work: Who Saves the Hero?

Humanity imagined many things when they took to the stars, yet they really didn't expect an alien attack, an almost invasion, and then to discover that they were very much newcomers to the Galactic scene. The Citadel Council has been in existence for 10,000 years, the Asari Republics space faring for 18000 years prior to its founding. In a galaxy where Humanity makes up less than one half of one percent of a population of three and a half trillion beings; one mere human, no matter who she is, feels like one impossibly small light striving against the vast darkness. How can one formerly dead human Spectre, working for a terrorist human supremacism organization she does not trust, prevail against the Collectors while attempting to discern Cerberus' true intentions? Where can she turn to for allies when the Council openly doubts her sanity and the Alliance does not trust her? When everything around her has changed during the two years she was dead, including her own body and mind, can she find something solid enough to rebuild her life upon?

Lazarus being brought back from the dead had been a miracle; to Spectre Amanda Athene Shepard that seemed to be the easy part.
- Inspired by *Who Saves the Hero? (Original Work)* by Kudara
- Inspired by *Of Sheep and Battle Chickens Series (Including Supporting Works)* by LogicalPremise
- Inspired by *A Thessian's Whisper and The Sheopardess and the Questing Beast* by PMC65
- Inspired by *Stones Thrown Before the Tide* by MizDirected
- Inspired by *Another Realm Series* by Katkiller-V
- Inspired by *LuckyFK Asari Collection - Artistic Nudes Included - Not Safe For Work!* by LuckyFK
- Inspired by *Euderion Asari Ship Collection* by Euderion
Part 1: Chapter 1:: Prelude and Setting: A Movie Afternoon

Chapter Summary

Prelude - also known as setting the stage for the story to actually begin. In this case, it begins with a movie and a mission.

References: Mass Effect Foundation Comic Series Volume 8 of 13; and Mass Effect animated film Paragon Lost

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The Mass Effect universe is the property of Bioware/Electronic Arts. No infringement of these copyrights is intended as this is a not for profit fan fiction work.

Revision History: 10/19/2017

Chapter Specific Re-write Notes: Completely Re-imaged ME1 battle of the Citadel, responding to Joker’s “should we jump in and save the Ascension?” with my desired response, “How about we get rid of the Geth with their help before taking on Sovereign so they don’t just attack us from behind?”

“Look we know Saren’s brother Desolas…”

“The Commander of the turian forces which invaded Shanxi,” the younger, maiden-aged agent added, staring at the folder in his hands and entirely missing the irritated glance the older, maybe even matriarch aged, male directed toward him.

“Yes, that one,” the dry tone must have gotten through because the younger, blond-haired one finally glanced up. “We know that he was a strong supporter of the Expansionist faction of the Hierarchy government. We know that a turian ship crash landed on Shanxi just before the actual invasion of the planet. And we know that as soon as General Arterius’s forces suppressed the outpost garrison he ordered what were clearly search sweeps in areas we had no troops - had never even really explored them beyond the initial planetary survey. Then we learn later that he showed up on Palaven right after the armistice was signed, doing a big song and dance routine for the news cameras and a gathered crowd.” He touched something on the table, bringing up a translucent display screen showing the scene in question.

“People of Palaven I have returned!” General Arterius roared from the top of his shuttle ramp, “They tell me I’m the first of our generals to address you since the Citadel brokered an end to the war with the Human intruders. This is no surprise - no true Turian wants to admit that any foe exists that he cannot defeat, and yet I admit no such thing. The turians whose lives were lost in the war did not die in vain. Behold!” Figures shrouded in purple appeared beside the General. “Valluvian Priests dressed as you remembered from legends! For centuries no one has been worthy enough to wear the cloak and cowl of their order. None have been allowed to enter Temple Palaven, but these turians
have come from the battlefront with honor. And their faith, their very fighting spirit, has transformed them!”

The older agent tapped the display again, forwarding it, “At the end of the clip you can see a wheeled cargo transport with something very large sealed in a cargo container on top of being moved into the temple. Then only a few hours later Desolau’s younger brother, Saren, calls in an unsecured bio-weapon emergency from inside the Temple. They incinerated the place with an orbital strike, only thing left of the Palaven Temple now is a crater.” Another motion replaces the video with a still image of the aforementioned crater. “This is of course, all old news,” grunted the older agent. “Everyone and their brother, from our fellow intelligence agents to conspiracy theorists, and newscasters to political comedians have rehashed the sequence of events from the First Contact War and the destruction of the Palaven Temple. Speculating what was in that cargo container that warranted such a response from the Turians, what if anything it had to do with his attack on Shanxi, and especially if there was the same bio-contaminant threat on Palaven was also on Shanxi and the Hierarchy never bothered to mention it to us.”

Popping another piece of sweet and salty caramel popcorn - with extra buttery caramel - in her mouth, off-duty Veteran Spectre Tela Vasir made a nearly inaudible groan of mingled amusement and annoyance at the on-screen dialog between the two agents. Humans had an unhealthy love of conspiracy stories, nearly as much as the salarians in fact. Only the salarians knew when it was a wise idea to never speak of some theories in public. Humans however, shouted their conspiracy theories to anyone who would listen - this movie in fact served that function. It was as if they wanted to be sure everyone knew they weren’t letting this one go, even though it only served to keep souring their relationship with the Hierarchy. General Arterius was seen as valiant defender of galactic law by most Turians, and they angrily resented the Humans ceaseless accusations of dishonesty and treason against their deceased patriot.

“Now though, with what happened at Eden Prime, I think we might be able to make a good guess at was in that container and why Saren might have called in an orbital strike on the very building in which his own brother was located.” The older agent manipulated the table and a second image appeared suspended next to the frozen video. One image captured from a fortunate angle from one of the many turian news agency’s cameras recording said event, which caught a clearer view of what exactly was concealed by the heavy purple cloaks and cowls. A view which caught the gleam of glowing blue eyes and cybernetics underneath the shadowing cowl. “Funny thing, those Valluvian Priests, if you look at them close up they look a lot like the husks on Eden Prime…only apparently more intelligent and of course turian.”

The blond agent placed his hands on the table and leaned forward to get a better look at the image. He then tapped the surface to bring up yet a third image, a close up of a human husk. “They do look a lot alike,” the younger agent agreed looking at the side by side images of the Valluvian Priest and human husk. “Shepard just ran into dragon’s teeth and husks in a mine out in the middle of nowhere.”

Tela watched as the younger Alliance intelligence agent leaned over the dramatically bluish lit table - it even had thin glowing blue lines running up it from the floor - and supposedly searched through the data files displayed on the table’s surface. No one in their right mind would work in such a dimly lit room where they could barely see the walls, thought Tela, but the nais had to admit that it did add to the visual drama of the scene.

“Here it is,” the pale-haired human commented pulling up yet a fourth image over the table, this time of some alien looking device. “Trebin, in the Antaeus system of the Hades Gamma cluster. Shepard said she thought originally that she had run into some type of test run of the dragons’ teeth, but then
that C-Sec turian, Valkarian, said he had heard of such things before, called them ‘machine cultists.’"

The older agent nodded, “We checked what records we could find on the Extranet. Turian’s right, accounts of machine cultist and such artifacts, some as big as this one, some much smaller, appear back thousands of years…for far longer than before the Quarian’s ever even thought about creating the Geth. So, the theory now is that General Arterius was seeking something to give the Hierarchy an edge over everyone else and he found it in an artifact similar to the one Shepard ran into on Trebin. But then somehow he lost the artifact, or lost control of it, and the ship it was on wounded up crash-landing on Shanxi. He didn’t want the Council to find out that he had some type of artifact in his possession and hadn’t informed them about it, so he created an excuse to attack Shanxi in order to search for it. Sometime before Admiral Drescher arrived, he located the artifact and then after the armistice was signed he took it back to Palaven with him along with some husked turian soldiers. Something happened though inside the Temple after the news video that convinced Saren that they had lost control of the artifact. Probably he realized they didn’t really have control over those husked turians, or the rate at which the artifact was turning their people into them. Saren finally realizes they are facing a kind of von Neumann outbreak and calls in the orbital strike to stop it.”

It was almost cute how humans apparently thought they were the only ones capable of putting all this together. The Spectre took a sip of her carbonated sugary drink, then absently swirled the dark icy contents…except really it wasn’t that cute, and humans certainly hadn’t been the only ones who had asked questions about the actions of General Arterius before and during the Relay 314 Incident and then his death inside the Palaven Temple. The Hierarchy hadn’t been pleased at how quickly news of the destruction of the Palaven Temple had gotten out, but there had been no way to deny it. The Palaven Temple was located upon the outskirts of Cipritine, Palaven’s capital. Millions of individuals, including asari and salarians, had seen the brilliant lance of light from one of Palaven’s own orbital stations. The Hierarchy’s testy assertions afterward that the bio-contaminate in question had been successfully contained, and that was all anyone needed to know about what was purely an internal matter of the Hierarchy’s government had only raised every other government’s curiosity about what had really happened inside the Temple.

“Now,” Tela returned her attention to the movie at the sound of the older agent’s voice, “decades later General Desolas Arterius younger brother, Spectre Saren Arterius, attacks Eden Prim with an army of Geth under his command. Geth using nano-technology devices, these dragon teeth, that can create husks from human bodies to use as shock troops.”

“Saren knew about these machine cult devices, knew what they did, found another one and let the Geth have it to develop more of them,” filled in the younger agent.

The older agent nodded, “That does seem to be the most likely scenario. Saren knows from what happened on Palaven that you can’t really control these husks, but in the right circumstances, like on Eden Prime you don’t need to - they’re just meant to slow down reinforcements or create chaos. Now the billion-dollar question - Desolas Arterius was a known supporter of the Expansionist faction of the Hierarchy and his younger brother followed in his footsteps, being an outspoken proponent of increased Hierarchy influence as well as being outspoken against the Systems Alliance. Did anyone else in the Expansionist faction know about Saren’s plans to attack Eden Prime? Do they know anything about what he plans now, how he got the Geth to follow him? Is the Hierarchy protecting Saren by covering up any knowledge of his activities just like they covered up for his brother?”

And…there it was, why this film had stirred up so much controversy. The Systems Alliance by proxy accusing the Hierarchy that they had known more about Saren and his actions and plans than they had shared, and the Hierarchy furious because once again the Humans were accusing them of
duplicity and treason with only the flimsiest of evidence to back it up. Tela frowned, with all that had occurred in the weeks and months following the death of Humanities first Spectre agent the nais didn’t really find it surprising that the Alliance had apparently made little to no effort to persuade the producers of this video to edit out its more politically inflammatory accusations.

Not once they got solid proof that Saren Arterius, younger brother of General Desolas Arterius, their villain of choice, was somehow in control of the Geth forces which had attacked Eden Prime; not once they realized that though they had won a Council seat they were still one voice out of four and could not prevent the Council ruling that the dreadnought that lead the attack on the Citadel had been a Geth creation and not the AI vanguard of the destroyers of the Protheans; and certainly not once Councilor Spartacus had publicly expounded on his government’s dismissal of Shepard’s claim - stating that everyone knew that those who interacted with beacons interpreted what little data they could understand as non-protheans though their own species unique beliefs, and that given Humanities superstitious preoccupation with doomsday mythos as well as their high rates of mental illness, the Hierarchy simply could not reasonably be expected to accept the former Spectre’s interpretation of the beacon’s data.

That had been an unpleasant time - Tevos rarely displayed any sign of anger, but that day the matriarch had clearly been furious with the Turian Councilor and by extension the Turian Hierarchy for so blatantly provoking the Council’s newest member species.

Tela realized she had tuned out quite a bit of the last few minutes of on screen action when her attention was abruptly reclaimed by the next piece of on-screen dialog.

“Ok I get that we are worried about some Turian Spectre only looking for weakness in our defenses, but what about the Salarians and Asari Spectres?”

What? Wondered the nais, how had they even gotten on this subject?

“Because we’re worried that the Salarians will only be looking for a better way of creating a bio-plague to kill us,” the older agent grunted.

The blonde human blanched, “That's a terrible thing to say!”

The older agent scowled disapprovingly at the younger one, “Don’t let all this holding hands and singing Kumbaya fool you. That's simply the way they are, Salarians are so paranoid that they only feel safe when they know they can kill everyone else off.” A subtle look of amusement crinkled around his eyes, “Sorta like a teddy bear or blankie with I -he made the human heart symbol-genocide embroidered on it for them to hug so they can go to sleep instead of feeling terrorized by the universe.”

“That's not really funny,” the younger agent responded with a growl.

“No it isn’t, it really isn’t,” the older one responded flatly, “when it’s real, it’s pretty damn scary. Just ask the Krogan.”

I love genocide? Were the human’s intent on offending everyone in this vid, wondered Tela. Though she now understood why her fellow asari Spectre, Anela M’Tara, had reacted with an irritated roll of her shoulders when Tela brought up that she was planning on going to see this film and then practically grunted that it would be better to discuss it after Tela saw it for herself.

“So how about the Asari,” the blond-haired agent finally asked after a few moments of silence, his
Tone wary.

Oh yes, what about the Asari, Tela’s brow rose as she wondered what gift of wisdom the older agent would have to share this time.

“The Asari,” the dark haired one repeated giving the younger agent an indecipherable look, “they will screw your brains out, make sure it’s just about the best sex you’ve ever had in your life, and take all the information they want from your mind while doing it.”

The blond opened and closed his mouth a few times before he finally responded, “That's not so bad?” he asked uncertainly.

“Right up until Intelligence finds out and then puts you in prison for spilling classified material. Then Bubba can screw your brains out, but that definitely won’t be the best sex you’ve ever had in your life.”

The younger gave him a long flat stare, his disgust evident in the curl of his lip. “At least they aren’t trying to enslave us or commit genocide.”

Oh Goddess, Tela swallowed a laugh, humans could be so maiden like with how they phrased things. Trying to reduce complex situations down to pithy comments while still holding a core of undeniable truth and then acting like they had done something wonderfully insightful. The political and personal relationships between Humanity and the Asari, ones which spanned both Citadel and Terminus space, were complex and varied, and simply could not accurately be reduced down to a one-line sentence. Yet the statement just made was still accurate - even the most bigoted human would probably agree that the Asari were a much better option for an unofficial alliance than the Turians or Salarians.

Tela found it interesting that quite a bit of the movie seemed to be about these two Alliance agents working behind the scenes to provide intelligence updates to the Normandy. However, unless Shepard had for some reason omitted all mention of Alliance aid from her reports, these scenes were completely fictitious. The first human Spectre, from what Tela was aware, had received very little intelligence from the Alliance or the Council during her hunt for Saren. The fact that Shepard managed to track him at all, considering the human’s lack of resources, was next to a miracle from the Goddess considering that the STG with all of their assets hadn’t even been able to stay on Saren’s trail.

Considering the extent to which Humanity apparently idolized Shepard, mused Tela, it was fortunate for the Council that Humans had next to no idea about how Specter’s operated or the resources normally made available to them. If they did, then they would realize to what extent the Council had not treated their first human Specter, Amanda Shepard, as an actual Spectre Agent. Without Nilus’s support, the human N7 Special Forces operative had received no in-depth training, no familiarization with how the Spectre’s operated and the varied assets available to them - and most tellingly, not received access to the intelligence gathering network that supported all Spectre level operations. From the rumors the nais had heard at the time, after Councilor Anderson had regained his temper after being informed of the complete extent of Spectre level assets, the Council had planned on pairing Shepard with another Spectre Agent for a few months to properly finish her training. Only that had never happened, for Shepard had never returned from her last assignment.

On-screen events moved forward to the events on Virmire. Mid-pickup of one ground team and all of the surviving remnants of Captain Kirrahe’s Third Infiltration Regiment, after having dropped off a second ground team and the improvised bomb for setup, Shepard was confronted by none other
than Saren himself. The discussion that followed related how Saren hoped that cooperation with Sovereign would earn those few who cooperated with the Reapers a chance at survival, even if as slaves, instead of total extinction. As counterpoint, Shepard argued passionately that Sovereign was deceiving him, that every so-called upgrade only served to further indoctrinate him, blinding him to the fact that the Reapers could still be defeated if only he would turn against Sovereign and uphold his oaths as a Spectre to protect the Galaxy.

Tela was actually surprised that they had included that part of the conversation, humans didn’t seem to want to acknowledge that Saren had done any good in his career as a Spectre.

Then of course there had been the unwelcome revelation that Geth ships could make short in-system FTL jumps, catching both Shepard’s team and the STG by complete surprise. Saren’s willingness to talk was revealed as only been a diversionary tactic to delay them. A sustained attack by both Shepard’s team and the remaining STG drove Saren off, but now precious minutes had been shaved from their mission timetable. Shepard was faced with the choice of going back for the team setting up the bomb and the certainty of coming under fire from the Geth fleet defending the planet, or leaving the other team behind and taking the only realistic chance of escaping the blast radius of the improvised explosive. Staff Lt. Kadian Alenko, in charge of the bomb’s ground team, had taken the choice out of her hands, starting the timer on the device and urging her ensure the safety of their ship and crew. He and his teams valiant defense of the improvised explosive, even in the face of their certain death, had ensured both the successful escape of the Normandy and also the destruction of Saren’s krogan cloning facility.

Tela’s omni-tool bracelet unexpectedly vibrated. Frowning, the Spectre cupped her hand over the small display to read the dimmed text. She had set it to do not disturb and only a few of her contacts could override that - Urgent meeting 1500 hrs, Councilor Tevos. The nais sighed, so much for her day off, at least she had time enough to finish watching the movie. Still, what could have come up that would be critical enough for the Asari Councilor to call her in during her agreed upon vacation time? Slumping down in her seat, the nais brought up a translucent data screen, usually meant for infiltration and typed out a search. Moments later Tela frowned as she saw no alerts for Republics space, hmmm, time to widen her search. Minutes later she found something…but still why would a reported attack on a human colony out in the Terminus systems stir Councilor Tevos cancel her leave and call for an urgent meeting with her?

A shift in the music drew Vasir’s attention back to the screen, the nais narrowed her gaze trying to identify the lush green planet strewn with ruins. Then she listened to the dialog between the various Normandy crew members, a 20-meter Mako drop when 100 meters was normally needed, this must be Ilos. Though Tela wasn’t certain if the Alliance knew about it, the Republics Naval Training facility had already created a simulation to duplicate this vehicular drop from a frigate sized ship. The situation had been changed so it wasn’t instantly recognizable, but the difficulty of the maneuver and skill level required by a frigate pilot to duplicate it had been carefully retained. Quite a few ‘excellent’ rated Asari Republics Naval frigate pilots had initially failed at it, but with their pride stung by the fact that a human pilot had managed it, the numbers of ARN frigate pilots who could duplicate the maneuver, at least in a simulator, was steadily rising. Still though, no matter what, the Normandy’s pilot, Jeff ‘Joker’ Moreau, had won himself a place in history for being the first to manage a successful vehicular drop in such challenging circumstances.

The veteran asari Spectre was relieve to note that at least there was no mention of the defunct supposed Prothean VI that Shepard had spoken to motioned in the film. At least that had been kept a secret, otherwise the Citadel forces currently guarding the scientists on Ilos would have had more issues with treasure seekers than they had already. Instead, the film implied that Shepard had been able to retrieve information about the Conduit and the fact that it was an experimental relay
connection to the Citadel from the data terminals the human Spectre had been able to access in the command center. The same place that she found the controls to open back up the bunker doors that Saren had sealed behind him, enabling her to follow along behind him. At this point, Shepard was clearly aware that she was fighting against time, focusing more on simply evading the fire of the geth which attempted to stop the pursuing mako until with a final burst of the mako’s thrusters the human Spectre steered the drop vehicle directly into the experimental relay, letting its mass effect field envelop the vehicle and send it thousands of light years across the galaxy and into the center of the Presidium of the Citadel itself.

The human actress playing Amanda Shepard was certainly lovely, thought Tela, and graceful enough in the battle scenes that followed as she led her team through the Citadel to the Citadel tower chasing Saren. The nais smirked, but firefights were usually not quite this artistic and she knew that Saren tended to make liberal use of grenades instead of these well-choreographed exchanges of weapons fire. Still though, it did look very impressive on-screen, and that was what brought people in to see it. Finally Saren fell, and Shepard was able to find the hidden console to regain control of the station - at least for the moment, from the Geth dreadnought. During the time it had control of the station the AI dreadnought had shut down all the relays into the Serpent Nebula, cutting the Citadel and beleaguered Citadel Fleet off from reinforcements, as well as sealing the ward arms of the station with it safely inside.

Shepard opened a communications relay, “This is the Destiny Ascension, main drives off-line, kinetic barriers are down to 40%. The Council is on-board, repeat the Council is on-board.” The human Spectre turned toward the windows, but as the station arms were closed all that could be seen was one of the ward arms. Bachjret Ward, Tela thought, familiar with the view from the Citadel Tower.

“Normandy to the Citadel, Normandy to the Citadel, please tell me that’s you Commander,” the voice of Normandy’s pilot broke through the Ascension’s distress call.

“I read you, Joker,” Shepard responded.

“Caught that distress call Commander, I’m sitting here at Andura sector with the entire Arcturus fleet. We can save the Ascension, just unlock the relays around the Citadel and we’ll send the cavalry in!”

Shepard shook her head in irritation, “The fate of the Ascension isn’t the primary tactical concern here,” she tersely interrupted her team who had started bickering about which would be better to do, open the Relay now or wait until the Geth were drawn further away from the Citadel. “I’m opening the Relay now,” she started manipulating the console while continuing to speak very rapidly to both her pilot and her team members. “The Geth’s primary mission isn’t to destroy the Citadel Fleet,” the human Spectre explained, “their primary mission is to ensure Sovereign gets control of the Citadel. The Citadel is actually a one-way relay linked to a location in dark space where a massive fleet of AI ships just like Sovereign is located. When the Fifth Fleet jumps in, the Geth are going to prioritize defending Sovereign over finishing off the Citadel Fleet because the sole purpose of this attack is to activate the Citadel relay and bring in that main Reaper fleet. The Geth will do what they did at Virmire, they will micro-jump back from wherever they are in the system and catch the Fifth Fleet in classic pincer unless Hackett destroys them before engaging Sovereign, and that will be easier with the assistance of what’s left of the Citadel Fleet.”

“Crap,” the expletive came from the Normandy’s pilot, “I already showed that data to Admiral Hackett, he was not pleased to learn they had the capability to make micro jumps like that, and we are beginning transit now.” Finally, Tela thought, as events wound up toward the final battle scenes,
the Spectre had heard that it was pretty good, accurate to what had happened, and had some exceptional special effects.

The Alliance Fifth Fleet arrived in almost perfect formation, turning immediately and fully engaging their drive cores to move as swiftly as possible toward the Geth ships still engaging the Citadel Fleet in an almost textbook flanking maneuver. Now caught in a cross fire, the Geth ships were forced from pressing their attack to attempting to defend themselves from two different directions. The fact that they were AI’s might allow them to calculate the best possible defense in the situation they now found themselves in, but you simply could not effectively protect yourself from two directions at once and not even an AI could calculate a way around that fact. It did not take long for the allied fleets to swing the tide of battle against the Geth and within a very short time the Geth ships began a fighting retreat, but towards the clustered group of relays and not the Citadel. Shepard still had control of the station, and she had not yet opened the ward arms so the Geth would be getting no assistance from their dreadnought and they apparently knew that for the next thing that happened was that they micro-jumped to the relay and began exiting the system altogether.

“We’ve driven off the Geth,” the Normandy pilot informed Shepard, “Hackett says to open the Citadel arms.”

“Understood,” the human acknowledged, “opening the ward arms now.”

“Let Sovereign come out to us and away from the station,” the gravelly voice of Admiral Hackett ordered his fleet. “We don’t want stray shots to hit the ward arms. Also mind your tactical lanes, I’m assigning dreadnought firing arcs now for the Everest and the Destiny Ascension, which is maneuvering to support us.”

That was the primary weakness of every dreadnought class ship, the entire ship had to maneuver to fire its long, spinal-mounted main railguns and they generally were not particularly nimble ships. The Ascension class super-dreadnought was actually fairly maneuverable for its size as the ship was, like all asari capital ships, designed to rotate around its central weapon and main drive. However, as the super-dreadnought’s main drives had been down at this time Tela suspected it had been painfully slow for Matriarch Lidanya to get the Ascension into proper position.

The Citadel’s arms were now open, but Sovereign did not move from where it clung like some type of monstrous insect to the top of the Citadel Tower.

“Sovereign is trying to break my lockout on the Citadel’s control systems,” Shepard broadcast on the open channel, “we can’t let it regain control and this program is only a VI vs. an AI.”

“All available frigates, start harassing that ship,” Hackett ordered after a brief moment. “Be very careful with your shots, but let’s give that thing something to think about besides trying to retake the Citadel’s systems.” A veritable swarm of ships, the distinct outline of the Normandy among them, darted off toward the Citadel, the whitish-blue burn of their thrusters bright against the purplish backdrop of the nebula. They began to circle around the two-kilometer-high dreadnought, peppering it with relentless fire, none of which did anything other than cause the monstrous ship’s barriers to shimmer at the point of impact.

It was at that point that inside the Citadel Tower the air was suddenly lit up with a massive discharge of reddish energy. “What the hell was that,” Shepard whirled around, then gaped in surprise at Saren’s corpse. Tela really couldn’t blame the human, outside of a horror vid you really didn’t expect a corpse to suddenly light up with red energy arcs, which literally lifted the body into the air, and then have said corpse’s flesh burn away to reveal a metal skeleton underneath. Then, as if to
reinforce that horror vid feeling, what was left of the turian Spectre’s body twitched and arched in an unnatural manner before completing its transformation into a husk-like creature.

Eyes glowing in the same eerie red that had so recently wreathed its body, the husk of the former turian Spectre declared, “I am Sovereign and this station is mine!” The thing leapt away and it took a moment for Shepard to locate where it had landed, clinging upside down from the ceiling on all fours as if it were some type of adhesion-toed lizard. For the next minute, battle raged both inside the tower and without it, and in neither case did those attempting to defend the Citadel seem to make any impression at all on their opponent. Outside the allied frigates could not break Sovereign’s powerful kinetic barriers, while inside it was all Shepard and her team members could do to snap off a few shots as they scrambled to maintain cover against a foe who leapt from ceiling to wall to floor while maintaining an impossibly constant stream of biotic attacks.

“It’s drawing power from the station itself,” Shepard realized, glancing around at the paneled walls which surrounded them. “Sovereign is a AI and it’s in these systems. We have to break its connection with the tower!” The human Spectre ducked behind a wall as the husked form oriented on her and began concentrating its attacks on her location. Shepard brought up her omni-tool, “Joker, if Sovereign won’t move then you have to attack the tower itself. Destroy it and Sovereign’s foothold in the Citadel’s systems should be broken.”

“But Commander...” The pilot protested.

“Withdraw! Withdraw!” Shepard motioned frantically to her team mates, urging them to retreat back down the way they had come up earlier. “Do it now Joker,” Shepard yelled as she flung herself down one set of stairs. Moments later the tower shuddered and the floor to ceiling armored windows cracked as the frigates shifted their attack from the black dreadnought clinging to the tower to the tower itself. The husked figure on all fours chasing down Shepard’s retreating team faltered, indicating that whatever force was controlling what was left of Saren’s body was having difficulty staying connected to it. Shepard’s theory, that Sovereign was controlling it through the AI ships physical connection to the tower, seemed to be proven correct. It was also all the opening the human Spectre needed, rising from where she had taken cover behind a raised flower bed Shepard threw what had to be her last few grenades at the metallic creature. This time a seemingly impenetrable barrier did not protect the turian husk from the explosive force of the small disk-shaped devices. Instead the creatures body was shredded by them, and seeing this Shepard’s entire team focused their fire upon the husk until it finally slumped motionless to the floor.

Shepard held up her hand, indicating that they should cease fire. Once they did, the human raised her omni-tool and began scanning still form. The husks twitched once, and Shepard’s team, who hadn’t ever lowered their weapons, opened fire. Instead of attacking however, the metallic form of the husk began glowing red and a wave of heat erupted from it. So intense was the heat that the metal floor tiles underneath the husk actually began deforming before its body abruptly disintegrated into a pile of ash. Fortunately for Shepard, the cameras hidden around the area of the petitioner’s stage had recorded the entire transformation process of Saren’s corpse, otherwise her recounting of it later might been written off by the Council as combat related trauma because it sounded so unbelievable.

The tower shuddered again and then a shot came through the cracked windows shattering them in a cascade of glittering fragments that were promptly sucked out into space by the sudden loss of atmospheric pressure. Fortunately for Shepard’s team kinetic barriers flickered briefly into place, giving them the precious seconds needed for everyone to grab something and magnetize their boots before the barriers failed completely with the next strike on the tower. Shepard’s team was forced to shelter in place as they waited for the atmosphere to completely vent into space as the structure
around them shook and debris began to fall down from above as the ships outside continued their bombardment. As soon as the rush of air had quieted somewhat Shepard was up and urging her team to move as quickly as possible toward the central shaft of the tower where they could begin making their way back toward the tower’s entrance. They had come into the tower by walking along the outside, but for obvious reasons that was no longer the best way out, not with the bombardment.

The on-screen action shifted from Shepard’s fleeing team to the battle raging outside, as Sovereign finally began to move, eliciting a ragged cheer from the frigate pilots that lasted only a second before turning to horror as the massive dreadnought displayed that it’s claw-like appendages possessed some type of unknown weapon. The massive dreadnought hadn’t even bothered to fire once during its approach to the Citadel, but it was certainly displaying now that it had commensurate firepower to go along with its massive barriers. Whatever the reddish beam like weapons were, they were capable of literally slicing the attacking frigates in half. Frigates were agile ships though, and it only took their pilots a moment to react appropriately to the fact that their formerly unresponsive target was now counterattacking and begin to dance around the reddish beams that lanced out from the relatively slow-moving appendages. Meanwhile the frigates crews were busy figuring out exactly what they were facing, “We’re measuring tremendous heat from those beams.” Then from the ARV Unanya, an asari frigate, “Its molten metal suspended in an electromagnetic field.”

Tela smirked, the warfare systems officer who had made the discovery was a returning Huntress who had raised three children, returned to school to obtain a few degrees in systems engineering, and then decided to return to the military as she was entering her matriarchal years since she did not feel she was particular suited to devoting her remaining centuries to either politics or assisting in the management of one of her Lineage’s many holdings.

“Finally, Sovereign is lifting off,” Hackett announced as the massive insect-like ship detached from the damaged tower, “Prepare to engage upon my order.” The black ships massive drive core enabled it to continuously accelerate at a rate far faster than any Citadel ship. Fortunately, though the AI dreadnought was starting from a complete standstill and several of the frigates, including the Normandy with its over-sized drive core were managing to keep pace with it. “Engage! Don’t let it escape!” Hackett命令ed, as soon as Sovereign cleared the ward arms and began a full burn toward the relay. Almost instantly the surrounding ships began firing upon the fleeing dreadnought, but still it’s powerful barriers held as it continued to accelerate away from the Citadel. Then the SSV Everest and ARV Destiny Ascension acquired the target and began firing, adding their massive spinally mounted railguns to the barrage. That instantly had an effect as red arcs began immediately flaring around the massive AI dreadnought.

“Its shields are down!” the Normandy’s pilot announced as he fired at the suddenly vulnerable enemy ship. Careful examination of the combat recordings afterward showed the Normandy’s missiles impacting against the Reaper just fractions of a second before the slugs from the Destiny Ascension and Everest, giving the official honor for the kill to the Systems Alliance experimental frigate and its pilot. Shepard’s team had to be dug out of the wreckage of the Citadel Tower, but everyone was alive and there were only minor injuries among them.

All across the galaxy figures of importance re-evaluated some of their opinions of Humanity. Contrary to expectations, Humanities first Spectre had successfully tracked down and killed the Citadel’s prior top Spectre Agent. In addition, the Alliance’s Fifth Fleet defeated a Geth fleet which had just devastated the Citadel Fleet. Humanity was offered a seat on the Citadel Council for its actions, and accepted.

Tela wondered if the Systems Alliance had yet recognized the magnitude of their mistake in doing
so, though she would be very surprised if their leadership had not. Humans, as many intelligent species, were contradictory creatures. They were capable of incredible selfishness and short-sightedness, but also shrewd insight and were well known for their adaptability. However, all the adaptability in the universe couldn’t overcome certain realities. While their economy was indeed robust for their population size, substantially helped along by Sirta Foundation’s patent on the multi-species lifesaving medi-gel, the reality was that Humanity did not yet encompass even 1% of the total galactic population. They had much too small of a population, only outnumbering the Krogan, Quarians and Drell; claimed only one garden world other than Earth with a population that numbered over a 100 million when most other species claimed garden world populations in the billions; and their economic GDP, though approaching an impressive 750 trillion, when compared to that of the other Council members whose GDPs were measured in the 100s of quadrillions or even higher in the case of the Republics...

Ideally the Systems Alliance would have realized their inability to fulfill their obligations before accepting the Council seat and come up with a way of gracefully declining it, but by accepting they had been neatly trapped into a scenario where they would inevitably fail and have to voluntarily relinquish their Council seat. Thus Humanities failure would set a much-needed precedent. There would be no exceptions made to the requirement that a member of the Council must be able to provide a set number of ships and personnel to assist in the overall safeguarding of Citadel controlled space, no matter that species special circumstances. That was how Tevos and Valern had gotten Spartacus to actually agree to offer Humanity a Council seat. They had been easily able to prove that it was inevitable that the Systems Alliance would fail to meet their obligations, and that failure would not only silence future requests by the Humans, at least until they were actually able to meet them, but also silence the near constant entreaties by the Volus and Elcor to be added to the Council. The Volus thought that they could simply buy their way into a Council seat and have the military requirements waived for them. Humanities failure would serve to show them that would not happen. The Volus would be forced to pay for the necessary ships and personnel and that was something the mercenary race would never voluntarily chose to do.

Reports showed that the Systems Alliance was already feeling the effects of their military buildup on their fledgling economy as the increased taxes required to support their Council fleet obligations threatened to slow their former economic growth to a standstill. Humanity however, as stupidly stubborn a species as they were, appeared to be obstinately trying their best to actually meet their obligations despite the fact that they had to realize by now that it was simply impossible for them to do so without destroying their economy and sending themselves into ruinous debt to either the Volus or the Republics. In either case, they would quickly find themselves in the de-facto situation of effectively being a client state to either the Hierarchy or the Asari Republics.

This was why Tevos had been so furious with the Turian Councilor for publicly expounding on his government’s dismissal of Shepard’s claim in such a manner. His speech had been clearly calculated to humiliate and infuriate Humanity as a race, and ensure that the Alliance would attempt to retain their Council seat for far longer than initially estimated. Instead of letting reason (hopefully) lead them into seeing what needed to be done to maintain their independence, Humanities pride and stubbornness was now fully engaged in maintaining their Council position. It would have to become painfully apparent to the System Alliance’s population that they simply could not meet their obligations before they would voluntarily give up their Council seat now, and by that time that happened they would likely be far more heavily in debt to the Republics than planned upon by the Matriarchs.

The Republics did not actually want the Systems Alliance as a client race, de facto or otherwise. Which was why, while Spartacus and the Hierarchy had their little moment of petty victory, steps were taken to ensure that the Hierarchy soon begun to pay for it. Nothing of course was actually
said about any of this aloud, the Republics never made any comment at all on the Turian Councilor’s announcement either way. Any astute observer of galactic politics however, soon became aware that the Republics was giving the Hierarchy a sharp and painful lesson in the consequences of displeasing them. The Matriarchs careful management of the Republics economy meant that it was still entirely independent of any other galactic government. The Republics did not need anyone else to maintain their level of steady economic growth, economic engagement with the other governments simply made the Republics economy even stronger.

That however was assuredly not the case for the Hierarchy whose economy was only afloat due to the careful management of the Volus. Contracts that were to have been made with Hierarchy manufactures, but had not yet been legally committed to, were instead given to Republic manufacturers. New contracts simply did not come the Hierarchy’s way, and overnight the export-import balance with the Republics unsubtly shifted against the Hierarchy, sending them spiraling into debt despite the best efforts of the Volus. Without the willing assistance of the Republics, the Hierarchy simply could not maintain a healthy economy and every month that passed the Turians were forced to go further into debt with the Volus. Something that the Volus would not do indefinitely, client state or not. Soon the Hierarchy would be forced to do something to appease the Matriarchy, though with apparently how irritated the Matriarchs apparently were with the Hierarchy Tela suspected it would take quite a bit more than just a few token gestures. In fact, Tela smirked as she thought it over, the last time she recalled the Matriarchs being this annoyed with the Hierarchy the Turians had been forced to apologize to the Humans and pay them reparations.

As the end credits played, Tela rose to her feet and began making her way through the exiting crowd toward the entrance. Well the movie had certainly proven interesting, the nais thought to herself, and with what had happened just a few weeks ago with that that Cerberus agent attempting to access Shepard's records… Pity Jondum Bau’s virus hadn’t worked as well as they had hoped, but still the ‘information’ they had allowed the human female to escape with had been scrubbed of any highly classified details. The data techs had left nothing on that disk that the Spectre’s weren’t willing to dangle enticingly in front of Cerberus in exchange for a chance to infiltrate their network. In addition, they now had enough biometric data on the agent to ensure that the human would not be able to step foot on any other Citadel world without being arrested, and certainly not be able to enter any sensitive areas without setting off immediate alarms even if the agent underwent reconstructive facial surgery to alter her appearance.

Long time habit had Tela carefully scanning the crowd for any sign of possible attack, but the nais didn’t really expect anyone who wasn’t either very familiar with her or actively using facial scanning software to be able to recognize her at the moment. Artful makeup altered the ancient purple Vasir lineage markings on her face, ones that once upon a time would have indicated she was a member of not only the nobility, but also a direct descendant of one of the followers of Athame and therefore a member of the ruling peerage, to the reddish generic Serrice markings usable by anyone descended from that area of Thessia while contacts altered the brown of her eyes to dark blue. It wasn’t a very complicated disguise, but it did serve to allow her to blend in with had been scrubbed of any highly classified details. The data techs had left nothing on that disk that the Spectre’s weren’t willing to dangle enticingly in front of Cerberus in exchange for a chance to infiltrate their network. In addition, they now had enough biometric data on the agent to ensure that the human would not be able to step foot on any other Citadel world without being arrested, and certainly not be able to enter any sensitive areas without setting off immediate alarms even if the agent underwent reconstructive facial surgery to alter her appearance.

Glancing down at her omni-bracelet for the time, Vasir estimated that if didn’t loiter she had just enough time to return to her Tayseri Ward apartment, take a shower, and prepare for this urgent meeting with the Councilor. That meant she needed to get her gear together for a potential mission and send a message down to the docks to make sure her personal ships was ready for departure. In the centuries the commando had been a Spectre, Tela could count on one hand the number of times Tevos had ever called her in for an urgent meeting and not immediately sent her out on a mission.
The nais sighed as she exited the theater, she should probably just wear her armor to the Council Tower.

An hour later, wearing her heavy Spectre armor in silver and blue, and with a tactical duffel slung over one shoulder, Veteran Spectre Agent Tela Vasir paused for a moment to stare curiously at the gathering of asari and humans in front of the Turian embassy area. As far as the nais could tell, protesting in front of the Hierarchy embassy and annoying the Turians was a popular human pastime. Though they indulged in it far less now than in the years immediately following their introduction to the Citadel. Back then the humans seemed to hold daily demonstrations whether they had permits or not, demanding that the Council investigate the other Turian client races. They had been convinced that the Turians were treating their client races quite cruelly; exploiting them; keeping them in a state of semi-enslavement - as any sign of rebellion was met with deadly force; possibly selling them to the Batarians to finance their fascist government; and, of course, that the Hierarchy had attacked them with as little justification as they had the Systems Alliance.

The Council had, after a few weeks of unending protests which only grew larger and more diverse as the protesting humans gained support from the other Council races, actually put together the demanded delegation of observers and sent them to investigate the Hierarchy’s client races. Most of the humans’ accusations were proven to be completely unfounded. In all cases but one, the observers found that the Hierarchy’s client races were exactly as the Hierarchy had claimed: aggressive, extremely hostile toward all other races than their own, and especially in the case of the poisonous Isreof, extremely deadly. The one exception the observers had found had been the Verg. Tela had heard the interesting tale from Kelessus D’Vevo, the lead diplomat of the delegation. When the delegates had at first been introduced to the Verg delegation it had seemed as if the race were as hostile, aloof, and xenophobic as the Turians claimed. Until the one human delegate the Council had allowed to be included, primarily to quiet the humans quite vocal claims that the delegation was obviously just an empty gesture without their presence, stepped forward, ducked past the turian guards, and approached the Verg.

“Don’t let them manipulate you into appearing to be what they’ve told us you are, aggressive, dangerous, hostile and most of all that the only safe place for us to be when it comes to you is with the turians in between us with their weapons pointed at you ready to kill you,” the human female, Maria Rodriguez, declared to the Verg delegates. “Just like they tried to claim with my race.”

One of the turian guards reached for her to pull her away from the Verg. “Get back here human,” his tone revealed his clear distaste as he uttered the word human.

That was apparently all it took, the Verg pulled the human female into their group and then stood in front of her, shielding her from the turian guards. “Maybe once it looks like you aren’t about to kill one of your own delegates, turian,” the leader of the Verg, a tall, mature black-haired female sneered, her tone a mirror image of his.

Lead Diplomat D’Vevo had immediately stepped forward, invoking the authority the Council had given her - though apparently they hadn’t actually expected her to have to use it - to force their turian guards to stand down instead of firing at the Verg and the human delegate. Later the asari diplomat had found out that the turian Commander had implied to the Verg that the delegates were there to make sure the turians had the Verg well under control and any sign of rebellion had been thoroughly quelled; not that they were there to evaluate how the Hierarchy was treating the Verg.

As a result of what had happened with the Verg, the delegates final report to the Council suggested setting up a permanent committee to monitor the Hierarchy’s treatment of its client races, which would establish Council’s right to oversee the management of these races. Especially since the
Hierarchy apparently was giving its client species the impression that they were acting with the direct authority of the Council anyway. They also proposed that a legal pathway be created for client races who met certain milestones to either gain full independence from the Hierarchy or alter their legal status within the Hierarchy to be similar to the Volus.

D’Veo had admitted that the human delegate had been very helpful in getting the turian delegates to agree to these measures. Wielding the Hierarchy’s own processes and procedures requirements as justification for the new rules had been very persuasive. After all, the Hierarchy would hardly let some allied group claim their authority without their direct supervision, and there was a clearly defined process for every official action - including a citizen surrendering their citizenship. The turian delegates hadn’t been pleased, but they had been neatly boxed in by their own methodologies. Plus, it was clear that the days of the Hierarchy acquiring newly spacefaring races and then keeping them in perpetual forced client race status with no apparent recourse to any higher authority and no oversight were over after the embarrassment of the Relay 314 Incident.

In the decades since those events, with a way to regain their freedom in place the Verg had ceased their attacks against the turian occupation forces on their home world, met their milestones, and were now in discussions about being granted self-governance. Their first official step toward being released from the Hierarchy as a client race and being recognized by the Council as an independent species within Council space. Though the Hierarchy had tried numerous ways to stop them, the Systems Alliance had been insistent about opening diplomatic relations with the Verg, and apparently the two species already had plans in place for trade, cultural exchanges, joint military training exercises and even possibly joint colonization efforts. Apparently besides from some initial misunderstandings, oddly something to do with a human companion animal Tela recalled, the two races got along rather well with one another.

As far as Tela was concerned the Hierarchy’s public reaction to the Verg wanting their independence was symbolic of all that was problematic about the Turian government. Far from admitting that the Verg might have reason to want their freedom, the Hierarchy was instead quietly claiming that once the Verg understood the Humans could offer them nothing they would return as a willing client race. Privately though, from what the asari Spectre had heard, all but the most stubborn of the turian Expansionists knew the Verg would never willingly return to the Hierarchy. Unfortunately the blame for that seemed to be falling partially upon the Humans for encouraging the Verg’s lingering resentments toward the Hierarchy. Apparently some turians thought that if only the Systems Alliance hadn’t interfered in Hierarchy affairs that the turian occupational force would have eventually persuaded the Verg to become fully productive members of the Hierarchy. Vasir knew that would have never happened, if it had even appeared likely that such a physically powerful race as the Verg were about to become a willing client race of the Hierarchy instead of an ongoing drain on Hierarchy forces, the STG would have arranged for some incident or incidents to ensure that never came to fruition. Though the Union played at being allies with the Hierarchy against the Republics, at least on some issues, Tela was fully aware they had no interest in the Turians becoming any more powerful than they were currently. That had been the primary reason the STG had given the Republics all of the data they had intercepted on the Hierarchy’s contact with the Systems Alliance, they hadn’t wanted the Hierarchy to claim the Humans as client species.

The signs the humans were so fond of carrying at these protests ranged from accusing the Hierarchy of protecting Saren to a more generic, ‘The Hierarchy is NOT actually the most amazing thing in the Universe.’ So, some of the protesters were here because of the film she had just watched, Attack upon Eden Prime, and its assertions about Saren, and some of the protesters were here simply to protest against the Hierarchy and the rhetoric of its Expansionist faction. Otherwise the spectacle in front of the Hierarchy embassy presented its usual scene, with mostly humans and a few asari maidens protesting while a few more nais, usually older, were scattered about observing the event.
On the other side the armored turians guarding the embassy could only stand like ornamental statues and glare with offended dignity at the protesters, not daring to even try and intimidate the humans into leaving or provoke them into doing something that would give the guards an excuse to call C-Sec and get their protest permit rescinded due to the number of watchful asari among them. Tela smirked in amusement, given their wandering gazes the ‘protesting’ nais were much less interested in the cause of the protest than in their fellow protesting humans. Doubtless, later on tonight several of them would wind up in bed together. Apparently that was quite common, and one of the reasons human protests continued to draw so many nais participants and observers.

Aware of the time, and the fact that she had loitered long enough, Tela proceeded up to the entrance of the Citadel Tower. Entering, she made her way through the security checks and scanners verifying her identity and then once past them to the elevators which would take her to the offices of the Asari Councilor. The outer offices were filled asari working at various data terminals and display screens. The majority of them were various types of analysts preparing reports for both the Councilor and the Republics Council of Matriarchs, while others were secretaries for the various officials working for the Councilor. Tela proceeded past the various desks, nodding politely in return to various greetings but not slowing enough to get caught up in any conversations to where four commandos waited at the entrance to the short hallway that led to the Councilor’s office.

“Saala, Spectre Vasir,” the lead matron commando greeted her politely as she scanned her credentials and then waved her through the final checkpoint.

“Saala,” Tela returned the greeting, before making her way pass them into the hallway. Pausing at the one side door the Spectre halted long enough to exchange greetings with the Tevos’ personal secretary, Arana Vare, before proceeding to the single door at the end of the hallway. Waving her hand across the entryway sensor the Spectre waited for the Councilor to acknowledge her presence. Moments later the doors parted, revealing a large, semi-circular room beyond them. Floor to ceiling windows along the length of the outer wall revealed a spectacular view of the Presidium. Though the window appeared to be a security weakness given all the security the Spectre had passed through to get to the office, Vasir was quite aware that the windows were high-grade armored and tempered glass with dual kinetic barriers both outside and inside.

Councilor Tevos was seated at her desk, two of her personal aides, both commandos, hovering about her as the Councilor went over something in the documents she was holding with them. A second later Tevos glanced toward the door, meeting Tela’s brown eyed gaze for a moment before returning her attention to her aides. The Spectre passed through the doors, paused to let them close behind her, then waited for the Councilor to finish with her current business. Another flurry of instructions, then the Councilor handed the documents to one of them with a nod of her head. The two aides dipped shallow bows to her and then departed out another door to their own offices. Vasir waited until Tevos turned her full attention to her before bowing politely and approaching the Councilor’s desk.

Teyos rose and stepped out from behind the desk, motioning toward the windows, “You are aware of the missing human colonies in the Terminus Systems.”

Tela angled her steps to join her in looking out over the Presidium, “I am,” she replied. So, this did have something to do with the missing human colonies, the Spectre mused.

“The attacks have been attributed to pirates,” Tevos commented, “however in addition to there being no survivors, there were also no bodies, no sign of any resistance, and every surveillance device has been wiped of data.”

Tela narrowed her eyes in thought, “Possible, but there should have been some sign of resistance.”
“Indeed,” the Councilor agreed with her. “Yesterday the Systems Alliance colony of Fehl Prime was attacked, however unlike previous times a few human marines were able to evade the initial attack.” Tevos paused for a brief moment, “Fehl Prime was attacked by the Collectors.”

Vasir stilled, the Collectors? That was…very different from pirates, and much more concerning. She had only ever heard of the enigmatic race collecting maybe a dozen or so individuals at a time, not entire colonies. “I’ve never heard of them collecting entire colonies before,” she shared her thoughts, hoping to elicit more information.

“To my knowledge they have not,” the asari Councilor responded, which, of course, meant that Republic Intelligence Service had no knowledge of them doing so either. “The human marines were able to collect intelligence on the Collectors, and even sabotaged their ship. Unfortunately, neither the colonists nor most of the marines survived the ship’s reentry and decent to the planet after the ships sabotage, however one marine and a single asari were able to escape the ship before it crashed. They provided proof that the Collectors had attacked the colony.”

The Councilor continued, “The asari was Doctor Treeya Nuwani, a Xeno-anthropologist there to study the remnants of the planets now extinct intelligent species and a colleague of Doctor Liara T’Soni. She may have interacted with a prothean device on the Collector Ship before it was destroyed. Also, Cerberus seems to have been involved somehow in the attack, Councilor Anderson believes they may have even been assisting the Collectors in their attack on the colony.”

Tela glanced over startled, why had there been a prothean device on a Collector ship? And Cerberus involvement with the Collectors? Assisting them in the attack on Fehl Prime? The nais wasn’t really surprised when it came to Cerberus, they seemed to be willing to do almost anything, even to their own people, if they felt it advanced their interests.

“Admiral Hackett of the Systems Alliance is debriefing her tomorrow upon Arcturus Station,” Tevos said, “I want you to make your way there as quickly as possible to observe her debriefing. Afterward, you will escort Doctor Nuwani to Thessia where the Council of Matriarchs of the Republics also wish to debrief her.”

Vasir narrowed her eyes, in other words make sure the Doctor did not disappear anywhere between Arcturus Station and Thessia. “Understood, I’ll make sure Doctor Nuwani arrives to the Council Chambers safely. Afterward?”

“Remain, Tevos replied, “and see if they have any communications they want you to deliver to me, then return here.”

Vasir nodded, that meant she was to deliver any intelligence documents too sensitive to transmit even over encrypted channels. “I’ll get ready to depart then if you have nothing else for me.”

“There is one other thing,” the Councilor commented, and something in the older nais’s tone caught Tela’s full attention. “Anderson shared with me that the type of ship that attacked Fehl Prime was the same type of ship that attacked the Normandy.”

Tela’s brown eyes narrowed, “You know of Cerberus’ recent attempt to gain access to Shepard’s Spectre files?”

“I do,” Tevos confirmed and then said nothing else.
“So, the Collectors went after the Normandy, killed Shepard. Then Cerberus comes looking for information on Shepard. Now we have evidence that Cerberus is assisting the Collectors. Did they also give information to the Collectors about the Normandy?” the Spectre mused aloud.

“Indeed,” Tevos turned toward her, her expression grave, “Goddess watch over you Tela, be cautious.”

“I will,” the Vasir assured her, stepped back, bowed and then departed on her mission.
The - formerly deceased - first human Spectre Amanda Shepard was pretty sure she was supposed to be impressed. After all the dramatic scene had been so carefully set with the sleek hunter lines of the new Normandy SR2 being lit up in deliberate sequence as it slid into the viewing bay berthing. A new Normandy, almost twice the size of the original frigate, gleaming new and shiny in white, black and gold, and branded with the Cerberus logo on the forward stabilizers. She could almost hear the notes of some suitable theme music playing in the background.

Shepard closed her silver hued eyes, ran one hand through...ok, over the two-day long fuzz on her head. When she had awoken in the Cerberus station she had been completely bald, her carefully kept auburn hair long gone over the years of her body’s reconstruction.

“You don’t look as pleased as I had hoped,” Joker’s voice sounded uncertain from where he stood beside her.

“No, no I’m ecstatic,” Shepard commented as she opened her eyes, “absolutely looking forward to either being jumped by the Batarians or League forces. Either would take the ship, one would make us mindless slaves and the other would probably just kill us out of hand rather than go through the trouble of capturing us alive.” She wouldn’t have known about the latter had it not been for Tali on Freedom’s Progress pulling her aside and sharing the information with her. Cerberus had been making friendly with the asari of the League of the Terminus over the past year or so. Kidnapping them, taking them to a hidden base on Trident, which was an Asari world with a sizable Human population under the control of asari Warlord Leorne Saris, and then injecting them with some biotic suppression drug. Afterward the Cerberus scientists had coerced their asari victims to use their biotics until they suffered cerebral hemorrhages and then died ugly deaths from continuous seizures. Warlord Saris had been the first to offer a standing bounty on any proven member of Cerberus.
caught in her territory. The other asari Warlords had quickly followed suit, and now the entire League had standing bounties for any member of Cerberus caught in the Terminus systems whether they were handed over to League forces dead or alive.


Shepard raised one eyebrow as she turned toward him, “To which?”

“The League,” the pilot burst forth as if that should have been obvious to her - which of course it was actually.

“I guess Cerberus hasn’t been sharing much of what they’ve been up to lately,” Amanda observed as she activated her omni-tool and transferred a few of the video files that Tali had given her. She was mildly surprised that they hadn’t been scrubbed from the device, but then perhaps that would have been a little too obvious while Cerberus was trying to persuade her to play along nicely with them.

“I hadn’t heard about this,” Joker looked sick as he watched the Trident news reports, “honestly I hadn’t, or I would have said something,” he hung his head.

Amanda glanced over at him with an inaudible sigh. Even if she didn’t believe him, and she actually did, she needed him to pilot this ship. “I believe you Joker,” she reassured him, “I’m sure they’ve kept you in a news blackout as much as possible, didn’t want you running back to the Alliance.”

“Yea,” he still hadn’t looked up, he shook his head, “this is going to be a problem, a big one.”

Her lips set in a frown, Shepard nodded, “From what I can tell we are going to be primarily operating in the Terminus without any backup in case we get in trouble and this ship broadcasts human supremacists and their technology up for grabs to the first one who is strong enough to take it and us. Normally I’d hope that any random League patrol ship would just let us pass by, but with what happened on Trident… Now they will attack us as well - one look at that Cerberus logo and they would see credits and a chance for revenge wrapped up in one shiny enticing target.”  She let out a frustrated sigh, “Probably alert every other League ship in the area as well, making it that much harder to escape.”

Shepard leaned forward, wrapped her hands in a crushing grip around the railing in front of her, and a snarl formed on her lips. “Shit fuck”, Shepard growled vehemently under her breath, then louder “Why not just hand us over to one or the other and at least get something out of it? Last I heard several Batarians were willing to pay up to fifty million credits to claim the first human Spectre as their slave.” She had heard that warning from one of her N7 buddies, Lt. Nate Jackson, who operated fairly regularly out in the Terminus Systems just after she had been inducted by the Council. “Should be a really interesting experience, except for…oh wait after they inject us all with their chemical concoction to lobotomize us we won’t have enough self-awareness left for it to really matter to us.”

“It’s supposed to be really fast,” Joker offered quietly as he subtly cringed away from her anger. “The ship that is,” he amended quickly as she shot a disbelieving glance his way.

“Good, because it looks like we will be doing a lot of running away,” Shepard growled. “Too bad that slavers like to setup ambushes right off a relay jump.” She shook her head, her expression hardening in resolution, “This won’t work, I refuse to put everyone in danger like this. I don’t fucking care if Cerberus likes it or not. At the very least it needs a different paint job to get rid of the just out of the shipyards look. Something scuffed up, and in subdued colors as if it’s been in service
for years.”

Shepard sighed and shook her head, “That won’t help that much though, the ship’s outline, as much as I like it, is unfortunately distinctive. Its unique, not really Turian and not really Alliance. Maybe we can do something with the right paint, fuzz the outline both by LADAR and eyeballing it,” she mused, “make it more difficult to identify.” She frowned in thought, “What about the shuttles? Might be easiest to just use a shuttle as much as possible and keep the ship close enough for emergencies, but out of immediate sight.”

“One UT-47 Kodiak Drop Shuttle,” Joker answered when she finally stopped speaking.

"That won't do," Shepard sighed, even though it was about what she had expected. "Our best bet in the Terminus Systems is to just not to be noticed whenever possible, and only a few human colonies or human PMC’s like the Blue Suns would use a Kodiak." She straightened, "That's how we always did our Special Forces operations out here, used either non-standard gear that didn't immediately stand out as human made or used asari or turian gear. Used a shuttle most of the time too for the same reason,” she added thoughtfully, “hard to stay covert and under the radar with an Alliance frigate hanging around. The fewer people notice you or the fact that you're human, the better your chances of a successful mission. We're just too rare as a race out here. Last I heard there were about 600 non-humans for every human in the Terminus Systems. We stick out like a sore thumb sporting a fluorescent yellow band-aid," Amanda paused to share a wry smile with Joker at the all too truthful jest. "We can get a shuttle off the Terminus markets, turian or asari doesn’t matter, and use it whenever possible. Blend in, look like every other merc and do our best to not even advertise our species."

Shepard grimaced, “I guess I’d better go speak to Miranda about this,” she commented, her tone turning sour. Honestly, she wasn’t looking forward to speaking with the Cerberus operative, the two of them just seemed destined to disagree with one another. It had begun upon their first meeting, or at least the first one Amanda had been awake for, when Miranda had killed Wilson instead of keeping him alive for questioning, then progressed to the dramatic argument the two of them had had just before leaving for Freedom’s Progress over the other woman wanting to implant her with a control chip -thankfully that suggestion had been turned down- and then continued on Freedom’s Progress over the fate of the quarian Veetor.

Freedom’s Progress. Even if it hadn’t been before, the reality of how it would be to be associated with Cerberus had been driven home by her unexpected meeting with Tali upon that frozen planet. The quarians with Tali had responded with instant hostility upon seeing the Cerberus symbol upon Miranda and Jacob’s armor. If Tali hadn’t been there, Shepard was certain the situation would have devolved into a firefight between the two groups despite her best efforts to diffuse the situation. Still though, speaking with Tali had been a very welcome piece of familiarity in this… strange and confusing renewed existence she had woken up within.

“Whatever happens Shepard… it’s good to have you back,” the genuine emotion in Tali’s tone had struck Amanda hard, making her wish that the younger woman had decided to take her up on her offer. It would be nice to have someone around she could trust not to stick a knife in her back if she didn’t do what they wanted.

At least she had been able to protect the traumatized young quarian who had witnessed the Collector’s attack on the colony, and shown Tali that she hadn’t been lying when she said she was working with Cerberus only out of necessity. The entire encounter had left her feeling slightly hollow however, and driven home the loneliness of her current situation.
Lifting her arm and twisting her wrist activated the holographic interface of Shepard’s omni-tool, and a few commands later revealed the current location of the Cerberus officer. “Alright,” she looked up at Joker, “I’m off to discuss this with Ms. Lawson,” she commented briskly.

Joker’s eyes widened, “Luck Commander,” he offered as she turned to leave.

Shepard paused, turned her head to meet his gaze with a knowing smirk, “Yea, thanks.”

Goddess she wasn’t looking forward to this, Amanda thought as she strode down the corridor, stifling her wince and flare of embarrassment as she thought of their earlier pre-Freedom’s Progress argument. Seeing the shock, momentary fear, and then wary understanding in Ms. Lawson’s eyes almost made it worth it though. Amanda was fairly certain that the Cerberus operative had thought she was going to threaten her with the pistol Amanda had drawn until the end of the barrel had settled underneath Shepard’s own chin.

“I’d rather splatter my own brains past all chance of you reassembling them, than be controlled with a mind chip.” Shepard had vowed grimly, flicking off the safety and settling her finger firmly around the trigger. She had waited a moment to make sure her message was understood before thumbing the safety back on and then lowering the weapon to re-holster it. “But then I’m sure your employer suspected as much which is why he told you not to.” Her pale grey eyes, hard and unyielding, had locked with the other woman’s, “Remember this; to you I may have been your project, your subject to salvage, but that ended the moment you woke me up. I’m a person, not a thing to be controlled. Why don’t you pause and think for a moment about how you would like it if someone did that to you.” There had been a reaction then, an obvious flinch that she hadn’t expected from the cold woman, but she hadn’t given Miranda a chance to respond before turning on her heel and leaving.

Her actions had been more than a bit melodramatic, but then her emotions had been running high ever since Jacob had informed her it had been two years since she had died - and then she had found out who exactly had spent so much time and money bringing her back from the dead.

Yes, the galaxy was inarguably a dangerous place. Yes, Humanity was vastly outnumbered by almost everyone else. Yes, there were actual very dangerous foes out there like the Hegemony, the Expansionist faction of the Hierarchy, as well as numerous other groups that saw the Systems Alliance as merely something in their way or as a ripe target for exploitation. In fact, several of her missions as a Special Forces operative had specifically been targeted at just these groups. Taking out their resources and targeting their essential personnel for surgical strikes aimed at destabilizing them among other things. Missions designed to either eliminate them as threats to the Systems Alliance, or reduce their ability to conduct operations against the Systems Alliance. Never once while she had been out in the Traverse or Terminus however, had she seen any sign of Cerberus personnel running the same types of missions.

As far as Shepard knew, she had never run into any Cerberus related operations until she had been inducted as a Spectre and sent to hunt down Saren. Then all of a sudden, she was running into Cerberus cells and their activities everywhere. Once, before she had firsthand experience of their operations, Shepard might have been inclined to turn a blind eye to their activities provided they resembled the types of missions she had carried out in the past. The reality though had been quite an eye opener, starting with the discovery that Cerberus was responsible for luring thresher maws to attack the colony on Akuze from a survivor of that attack, one Corporal Toombs, whom they had captured and experimented upon until his escape from them. Then there had been her investigation into the cause of the deaths of Rear Admiral Kahoku’s men at his request, an investigation that had led to her discovering that Cerberus had planted a false distress beacon to lure his troops into a thresher maw nest - their reason to prevent those Alliance forces from acting on intelligence they had
found regarding Cerberus illegal activities. Then Cerberus had gone after Kahoku, eventually tracked him down, and then tortured and murdered him.

That had been quite enough for Shepard’s opinion of the human survivalist paramilitary organization to shift from neutral to considering them to be a clear and present danger to Systems Alliance personnel and interests. However, that hadn’t been the last of her run ins with the terrorist group, on Chasca a Cerberus team deliberately turned the entire colonist team into husks in order to study them. Shepard’s last Cerberus discovery had occurred while following the trail back from the rachni infestations at Listening Posts Alpha and Theta, and finding out that the rachni in question had escaped from the Cerberus facility on Depot Sigma-23 where a science team had been experimenting on them. Prior to that discovery Shepard had been almost convinced that somehow, despite what she and the rachni Queen had shared telepathically, she had made a disastrously wrong decision in letting the Queen go on Noveria. But no, it had been Cerberus again, their reckless behavior resulting the deaths of nearly an entire brigade of Alliance soldiers. At that point Amanda had been convinced that Cerberus interpretation of the word protection did not at all agree with her interpretation of it, rather the opposite actually, and the entire group needed to be rounded up and put in padded cells for everyone’s protection from them - including themselves.

Yes, she understood how and why groups like Terra Firma and Cerberus existed and drew a significant amount of support for their publicly stated goals of putting Humanity first to ensure human survival in a hostile galaxy. A large percentage of humans, especially those who were born on Earth and had never been anywhere else, were simply frightened of the rest of the galaxy, and in such an environment it was easy for such fear-mongering groups to recruit members, and even gain the covert support of elements in the Systems Alliance government and military. However, the truth was that Cerberus was a dangerous terrorist organization, and no smooth words from the Illusive Man about only doing what was necessary to protect humanity and keep it strong would ever make her forget what she had actually witnessed of their activities.

Shepard would never forget the discussion on ‘hard choices’ her group had during N7 training. Their trainer had made a clear distinction between being able to make actual hard decisions and twisting your thinking to justify choosing a hard decision when other equally valid options were available solely so you could point at a bunch of dead bodies, often civilians, and boast about being able to make the hard decisions. That was sociopathic level thinking and would promptly get you in front of judiciary board and incarcerated if you were responsible for any deaths or in the case that everyone got lucky and lived, Category 6’ed out of the military. Ever since then anyone who boasted about being able to make the ‘hard decisions’ had set off very loud alarm bells in her mind and earned her cautious wariness of them. The ends rarely justified the means, and history had shown that people who thought that way were responsible for some of the most inexcusable atrocities ever committed throughout human history. Cerberus was right there with the worst of them, making unnecessary ‘hard decisions’ that resulted in needless deaths, tarnished Humanities reputation galaxy-wide, compromised their ability to work with their allies, and generally made things more difficult for the Systems Alliance rather than in any way making them easier.

Shepard stopped in front of Miranda’s door, closed her eyes and dipped her head, going in all worked up about Cerberus and their supposed ‘protection’ of Humanities interests would do her no favors. Deep measured breaths, focus only on the breath, focus only on the movement of breathing in and out - let your mind calm. One final breath then Amanda opened her eyes, took a moment to stretch her head from side to side to get rid of the lingering tension in her shoulders, and then waved her palm over the door’s sensor. As the seconds stretched on, Amanda began to wonder if her omni-tool had been correct, then just as she was about to double check the door slid open. An office lay beyond, with Shepard’s quarry sitting behind a long, multi-tiered desk strewn with pads and folders.
The Cerberus operative in her skin tight black and white armored jumpsuit barely glanced up from where she was typing away at her keyboard, “May I help you Commander.”

Shepard’s brow rose at the crisp tones, this was going to be such a wonderful conversation she could tell that right now. Still…she stepped though the doorway, “I had some questions about our expected area of deployment for the next few months.”

That was enough for Miranda to actually glance up at her with a slight frown, “All of the previous colony attacks have taken place in the Terminus Systems, I wouldn’t expect that to change.”

“Who’s our backup in case we run into slavers or bounty seeking League ships?” Amanda queried as she crossed to the nearest chair and slumped down in it.

That stopped Miranda from typing as she finally gave her full attention to the Commander. “The Normandy should be able to outrun any of them. Mr. Moreau is an excellent pilot, and of course there is that fact that our stealth capabilities are slightly more advanced than the original Normandy.”

Shepard made a show of considering this, then slowly nodded, “So we are going to spend all of our time running and evading and hoping that some ambush, especially a coordinated one by one or more League fleets, doesn’t eventually catch us off guard?”

Miranda pursed her lips and scowled at her, “What is this actually about Commander.”

Shepard smiled, she was pleased that the other woman had seen though her vague attempt at acting, she hadn’t really put much of an effort into it after all. “Trident, the League, slavers - us painting an unnecessary target on our backs by dangling what is obviously an advanced Cerberus warship in front of various Terminus groups who have every reason to either see us as a quick buck or have every reason to hate us,” she responded.

The Cerberus operative’s expression soured, “Trident was a mistake, that cell was given strict instructions for their research protocols and they ignored every one of them.” One russet brow rose, but before Amanda could say anything… “Yes, I know how that sounds,” Miranda admitted her dark eyed gaze meeting Amanda’s own, “but I’ve seen what they were authorized to do and I know what they actually did on Trident. Too many join Cerberus out of simple bigotry and that cell had an unfortunate concentration of them.”

“And no one noticed this? Checked up on them?” Shepard knew her disbelief was seeping into her tone.

“We are now, all cells were reviewed after what happened on Trident,” the dark-haired woman assured Shepard.

Much to her own surprise, Amanda was actually inclined to believe the other woman. Or at least believe that was what Miranda believed, or really wanted to believe one. “In any case,” Shepard offered after a moment, “we have to deal with the fallout from it especially the standing bounties.”

The Cerberus officer shook her head, “There’s no hiding…”

“Of course there is,” Shepard interrupted her, “I can name off at least six things that would be purely cosmetic changes and one that wouldn’t cost very much.”

Dark brown eyes narrowed, “And what would those be,” Miranda inquired, her tone edgily
Shepard paused, allowing a hint of true regret to show though, “As much as I’d love to keep it, Normandy is too distinctive a name, as is the SR2 designation. Unfortunately the ships outline is pretty unique, so it will be hard to hide that but some anti-reflective paint in matte colors will make it harder to discern both by LADAR and the Mark-1 eyeball. Choose a non-descript name for her and make the necessary registry and IFF changes. The Cerberus logo and bright color scheme need to be replaced with basic grey and black, like most of the no-name Terminus mercenary group ships. The Kodiak needs to be replaced as well; it’s too unusual out here, you’ll need to replace it with something turian or asari made thats well armored and reliable. Since the ship is so distinctive, we’re going to want to keep it out of sight and use the shuttle as much as possible. If there are any interior Cerberus logos which can be seen by someone walking by or delivering cargo, they need to be removed as well. Same thing for the crew, no Cerberus marked clothing, they can choose what color and style jumpsuits they want for replacements but nothing distinctively Cerberus related.”

Shepard couldn’t help but give a groaning laugh at what was next, “And finally we need to get a hold of that god-awful armor we used for N7 operations out here,” she waved one hand, “Jacob’s probably familiar with it. It’s definitely not going to win you any beauty or brawn, for that matter, contests, but it blends in well and makes it damn difficult to tell the species or even sex of the person wearing it. Make sure you get all the options they have for shoulder guards, hip guards and shin guards, they’re mainly decorative, but that’s the point. You mix and match them, paint them up and everyone looks like their wearing slightly different armor instead of everyone suspiciously looking alike.”

Miranda did not look convinced, “You expect that to actually work? At some point, at the very least they’re going to notice we’re a ship full of humans, and that will be enough to raise suspicions.”

“I expect it to help,” Shepard corrected her, “and at least delay that day.” She sunk further into the chair, “And I need to go to the Citadel.”

“The Council has disavowed your warnings,” Miranda coldly stated, “and the Alliance has gone along with them.”

“So I’ve heard from your boss,” Shepard admitted, through sheer force of will keeping her calm facade even as visions of throttling Sparatus danced through her head. “Still, even if we can’t get any official Alliance support, perhaps Councilor Anderson can do something to allow us to passage through League territories…maybe even get my Spectre status reinstated even if only on a probationary basis.”

“That…might help,” Miranda reluctantly admitted, “the League Warlords are,” the dark-haired woman grimaced, “rightfully incensed with what happened on Trident and many of the humans that owe them allegiance are eager to prove their loyalty. There is a substantial chance that they might reveal our presence to the Asari if they become aware of it.”

Shepard snorted softly in wry amusement, “You mean they made pledges of allegiance and loyalty to Warlord Saris’ Lineage, as well to her personally, and the fact that Cerberus had facilities on Trident at all and were allowed to operate out of there for apparently years has made her question whether or not she was wrong to allow humans to settle Trident. Now they’re desperate to make sure nothing else happens which might offend her and get them kicked off Trident altogether.” One brow rose at the other woman’s surprised look, “We did a quite a few operations out here, got several briefings concerning the various Warlords of the League of the Terminus. The Terminus asari are very feudal in their thinking, very much the way they were on Thessia some thirty thousand years ago. One
Lineage rules an area or territory, with the ruling Warlord leading the Lineage. If you want to move in, you make some very binding oaths of loyalty to the Warlord and her Lineage. If you break them, you are a traitor and an oath breaker, and the Warlord will either order your death or permanently exile you depending on how the exact nature of your transgression.”

Amanda paused for a moment, allowing her thoughts to coalesce before continuing, “The humans on Trident called their oaths into question by not turning in Cerberus in the first place. If they give Warlord Saris any more reason to doubt their loyalty, they could find themselves very quickly declared oath breakers and instead of her forces protecting them they could find themselves exiled and facing her forces when they come to throw them out.” One glance confirmed that she was on the right track, “Not only that, but what happened on Trident made the other League Warlords suspicious of the humans in their own territories didn’t it?” Miranda’s expression was carved in ice now, “So now we have the situation that if any colonist anywhere within League space doesn’t turn us in, and a Warlord found out about it, at best it would get their entire family turned out, at worse it might even get their entire human settlement forcefully removed from the League. Does that about sum up the situation?”

“That seems accurate,” Miranda agreed, her voice clipped and expression stony.

“So, someone will turn us in, out of sheer self-preservation if nothing else.” Shepard knew she had over-made her point by more than just a bit, but damn it, Cerberus evidently hadn’t changed a bit in the past two years. No matter what they claimed to be doing, they seemed to consistently manage to do more harm than good to human interests wherever they went. She snorted in abrupt macabre humor, please Goddess let her not end up pulling a Saren because of something ‘brilliant’ Cerberus did in her reconstruction and end up helping the Reapers instead of fighting them.

She looked up to find Miranda watching her with an angrily offended expression, not wanting to get into it further she just shook her head, “Ok, focusing on what we can do vs the many obstacles in our way. How many fully independent human colonies are left in the Terminus now? Freedom’s Progress was one of the largest ones I recall.”

Miranda frowned at the change in subject, but seemed to accept it as she replied, “There were only a few independent colonies to begin with. We believe the Collectors began with a new colony called New Dehili, then they attacked Trafager, Jiawey, and New Auckland before they attacked Freedom’s Progress. The only completely independent colonies they haven’t yet attacked are Horizon and New Canton.”

Shepard nodded, “And Systems Alliance aligned Terminus colonies?”

“Sondara, New Queensland, Cai-Shen, Ferris Fields and Fehl Prime were already attacked, and the Alliance is in the process of rebuilding them. Cyrene and Hange Prime are the only Alliance colonies that have not yet been attacked.”

“Hmm,” Shepard considered the information, “We need intelligence on the defenses for Horizon, Cyrene and Hange Prime then, the Collectors will most likely go after the least defended one next. Only after they attack all three would they probably consider going after a world like Trident, especially since all the asari Warlords have mutual aid pacts with one another.”

“I already have that information,” Miranda said as she turned back to her data terminal, “I’ll send it to your omni-tool.”

“Good,” Amanda was dutifully impressed, and when the file arrived a moment later, “Thank you, I’ll
take a look at this later.” Shepard was reminded of something else that was important, “By the way, how are we doing on building up our ship numbers to meet our Council requirements?”

The dark-haired woman’s eyes narrowed on her, “The actual shipbuilding is proceeding well, but the increased taxes are stifling economic growth and both business and the average citizen are starting to complain about them. But then that’s what the Council apparently wanted,” bitterness was apparent in Miranda’s tone, “for us to admit that we aren’t able to meet the obligations of our Council seat and as a bonus silence the Volus and Elcor’s regular petitions.”

Shepard simply looked at her, none of this was unexpected.

The Cerberus operative’s dark eyes narrowed even further, “You knew.”

Shepard snorted, “Of course we knew, promoting the smallest economy out of all official Council races to be the fourth Council member without making any provision for us to provide any less military forces than the Asari or Salarians? We knew, but we needed an excuse to increase military spending and we knew the Senate would bury their heads in the sand about the reality of it to get that spending increase authorized. Then they would be trapped. Sure we would have to go in debt to the Republics, but better in debt than dead in a few years.” Shepard’s lips curled upward in smile that showed a bit too much tooth as she felt a sense of vindicated satisfaction, “What that also means is that the Alliance, or at least some of the Alliance, has not gone along with the Council’s disavowing of my warnings. They’re still preparing for the Reapers. I need to go see Anderson,” she repeated her earlier assertion.

Miranda leaned back in her chair and bowed her head, her expression considering, “It will take several days to make the changes you have suggested, and I can’t say right now how long to get the armor. In the meantime, the Illusive Man has sent over four dossiers for you to look at information about specialists he suggests you recruit for the mission. I’d suggest we go after Mordin Solus, a well-respected salarian professor currently located on Omega, we need to develop counter-measures to the Collectors immobilization technology, however…”

Shepard filled in for her, “Aria is one of the Warlords who has a bounty out on any Cerberus personnel caught within her territory - dead or alive, which makes us targets of not only her forces on the station but also any merc who wants to make some quick cash.”

“Yes,” Miranda agreed, “we can proceed with two of the dossiers without crossing into League controlled Terminus space. The one for Doctor Okeer and Jack, no last name known.”

After the other woman sent her the information on the dossiers she had mentioned, Shepard took a moment to quickly look them over.

Dr. Okeer

- Millennia of combat and strategic experience
- Rumored familiarity with Collector technology

A brilliant and brutal krogan warlord who fought in the Krogan Rebellions, Dr. Okeer has become obsessed with saving the krogan people from the genophage and is believed to have contacted the Collectors in an attempt to gain technology to that end. He is currently in a Ragar Kolo camp on Korlus, though the nature of his relationship with the batarian and krogan mercenary group is unknown.
Jack (no last name known)

- Exceptional biotic ability
- Note: Criminal background, currently in custody

Jack is rumored to be the most powerful human biotic ever encountered. Very little additional data regarding Jack is available, except that the subject has a history of violence and should be approached carefully. Currently, Jack is being held on the Turian prison ship Purgatory. Cerberus has negotiated for the prisoner's release.

“Alright let’s go for Jack first then, if the ship still isn’t ready, we can go ahead and pick up Dr. Okeer,” Shepard decided after reviewing the two files. This Jack seemed like a simple pickup, and then he or she could assist them on Korlus, which would give Shepard the opportunity to see how they operated in combat conditions. “Let’s head out at 1000 hrs tomorrow morning,” she decided, that should give them enough time to get ready and make the transit to this prison ship.

“Very well Commander,” Miranda responded, “I will pass along the time to Jacob.”

“Thank you,” Amanda replied as she rose, “see you tomorrow morning.” She headed toward the door and then paused just in front of it before turning back, “Miranda... for the ship name MSV Menrva.”

The other woman frowned, “Menrva?”

“It’s Etruscan for Minerva,” Shepard informed her.

Miranda’s brow rose in comprehension, “The Roman Goddess of Wisdom?”

Shepard smiled back, “And strategic warfare, seems apropos.”
A few hours after she left the Cerberus operative’s office Shepard received a message from Miranda informing her that the other woman had submitted her suggestions to the Illusive Man for review, and requesting her presence on the Normandy SR2/possibly future MSV Menrva for a walk-through of the ship and to meet her new crew.

Entering the vessel through the main airlock on the command deck, Shepard motioned for Miranda to go on ahead, assuring her she would catch up in a few minutes after checking in with Joker. Turning, she made her way forward to very front of the ship’s fuselage, the bow of the vessel. Windows, windows everywhere top and bottom, was her first impression of the ship’s bridge. Once they left the station, she had no doubt that the view from here would be very impressive. It would also be extremely vulnerable during combat if the bridge relied solely on the ship’s barriers for protection, so she hoped it came with some deployable armor. Joker was still a bit subdued from their discussion earlier, but still rallied enough to wax almost poetic about the comfort of his pilot’s chair. Including the fact that it was upholstered in quality leather.

And then the strange holographic blue globe next to Joker spoke up, or as Joker called it…ship cancer. An actual AI…completely against both Citadel and League laws, incorporated into the basic electronics and wiring of the ship and shackled by Cerberus. Who knew what hard coded backdoors they had built into the AI’s programming? Ones that not even it might be aware existed until they were activated. If it wasn’t for the fact that the AI was hardwired into her ship, Shepard would have had fewer problems with it. Even with her encounters with the Geth during her hunt for Saren, and their alliance with the Reapers, Shepard wasn’t quite certain what to think of AI’s in general. Perhaps it was simply due to her upbringing as a human. There were so many different stories humans had written about AI before they had even found the ruins on Mars. Murderous AI, hero AI, and simply indifferent AI, all of them were represented in various stories, films and games.

That had actually been a source of contention between she and Tali over the Geth during their hunt for Saren. If the Quarians had not attempted to destroy them would the Geth have revolted or not?
Tali had held with almost religious fervor to her Migrant Fleet teachings and adamantly maintained that eventually they would have rebelled, but Shepard wasn’t quite as certain. AI’s weren’t organic, they weren’t limited to one physical body. Would they even care that some of their platforms were picking vegetables and doing household chores if they were allowed to self-task other platforms? The fact that the Geth didn’t make any violent attempts to defend themselves at the start of the Geth War until nearly the last of their Quarian defenders fell suggested they might not. On the other hand they had quickly turned into merciless genocidal murder bots and nearly wiped out the Quarians once they did start fighting, and then three hundred years later chosen to follow Sovereign, mused Shepard, so perhaps Tali was right about them.

In any case, Shepard shook her head in bemusement, it seemed that Cerberus had chosen to completely ignore the actual history the Galaxy had with AI in favor of focusing on the way Human science fiction frequently portrayed AI’s being used - which was to operate a ships electronic and cyberwarfare suites. Even the AI’s name, Enhanced Defense Intelligence, sounded like something they had taken right out of a popular gaming series. What the AI had admitted next though was not nearly as geekily amusing - not when the topic was collating all the records from the ships on-board monitoring devices for review by the Illusive Man.

In other words, the AI was tasked with spying on the crew, and there was no telling how extensive it’s monitoring capabilities were throughout the ship. It was probably best to assume that the entire ship was closely monitored, which meant that she should also assume every conversation was being recorded by passive monitoring devices. Every electronic communication would also be monitored, but then that was the case on any Alliance military ship, thought Shepard as she made her way toward the ship’s CIC or combat information center. Passive scanning should let her know if more active scanning measures were being employed to monitor certain biometric data. Though honestly her Cerberus provided omni-tool was suspect there, Shepard realized with a grimace. No telling what data it was sending on her biometrics and activities. Maybe while she was on the Citadel she could get this one examined to see what information it was storing and sending, and if necessary replace it with an Alliance hardened one.

“I think Joker has a leather fetish,” Shepard confided with a smirk as she came up to the waiting Cerberus operative.

Miranda rolled her eyes, but did not otherwise reply to the Commander’s quip. Instead, in a completely professional tone, she responded, “This is the CIC, the ship’s tactical center, providing processed tactical information as well as the navigational display and control center. Behind the CIC are the Research and Tech Labs, the Armory, and the Briefing and Communications Room. If you would like, while we are on the Command Deck, we can speak with Jacob about obtaining that armor you mentioned earlier.”

“Sure,” Shepard agreed easily, following along behind the dark-haired woman as they walked around the large oval of the navigational center. Miranda hadn’t been nearly as obstructive as she had anticipated over her suggestions about how to conceal their identity, so she was feeling slightly more charitable toward the dark-haired woman now than earlier in the day. Perhaps the operative had been just as concerned about how they would be able to complete their mission, but hadn’t mentioned anything to her boss. Which actually…Amanda frowned, was something to consider. Just why did a terrorist organization want to boldly advertise their presence by stamping their logo on nearly everything when so many different groups were gunning for them? It was…odd and rather suspicious now that she thought about it.

Still though, this wasn’t the time to bring that particular question up. She did however have a different question. “Those independent colonies the Collectors hit - I’ve been to New Dehili and
Trafager, and I already mentioned that I’d been to Freedom’s Progress a few times. Those colonies all have a red-light section of town full of bars, clubs, casinos and brothels just to lure in mercenaries. Mercs come, spend their money and have a good time, and as a side benefit their presence as well as the regular ship traffic from Alliance and League space serves as an extra deterrent to slaver attacks. I noticed on Freedoms Progress that there weren’t any visiting mercenary ships at the starport. Was that the case at the other to colonies, the Collectors attacked in between mercenary group arrivals?”

Miranda slowed, shot her a sideways glance. “Correct,” the operative confirmed. “On New Dehili the Collectors attacked within a 16-hour window just after an Eclipse ship left and a Blue Suns ship was due to arrive. The Blue Suns were actually the one’s to first discover their disappearance. On Trafager, the same thing, but this time the Eclipse were the ones who arrived only to find the colony completely deserted.”

Shepard frowned, “Interesting, so they’re monitoring these colonies closely enough to know exactly what the ship arrival schedules are and when to attack to avoid them. And…they want to avoid them. I wonder why?” she mused softly. “In their attack on Freedom’s Progress they obviously had sufficient numbers and equipment to subdue and clear out almost a million people in less than 12 hours. That’s what…” she had to pause to do the math, “80,000 people in an hour? Or around 1400 every minute? When you have a force capable of that why worry about a few thousand or so mercenaries?”

“We know they subdue the population using those paralyzing seeker swarms from the footage recovered from Freedom’s Progress,” Miranda replied, “and that they used some type of hovering stasis pod to confine and move them onto their ship.”

Amanda felt an upwelling of helpless rage and sorrow as she recalled how the Collectors had lifted and thrown the colonists into those pods as if they were nothing but cargo. It reminded her too much of the way Batarians treated their captives. Realizing what she was doing, the Commander exhaled slowly, and forced herself to emotionally detach from the colonists’ situation. Rage and sorrow might make her feel as if she were doing something, but the fact of the matter was that her emotions didn’t actually do anything for those colonists or in any way affect whatever was currently happening to them. Clear thinking might however, or at least might prevent more colonists from suffering the same fate.

“Commander?” Miranda glanced over curiously at her silence.

“Just thinking about the information we got from Veetor,” Shepard deflected, “Those seeker swarms allow the Collectors to subdue large populations relatively easily, and those pods seemed somewhat automated in their pathing. Between the two, its likely the Collectors only need a relatively small force to take a colony. I would guess only slightly more than the minimum number required to collect and move the colonists. That would give them some leeway if they faced more opposition than expected once on planet. Minimal numbers would also account for them avoiding attacking the colony when there were a large number of visiting mercenaries, as would the seeker swarms being confused by the presence of multiple species which is common in League mercenary groups.” She followed Miranda through a bulkhead door, the word ARMORY painted in white on the grey wall beside it. “We might even be able to get a very rough idea of how many Collectors were on Freedom’s Progress from the information Veetor gave us.”

“Already done,” Miranda replied as she stopped just inside the long room, “We estimate the number of attacking Collectors was around 15,000.” The dark-haired woman scowled, “If not for those seeker swarms the colonial militia would have been able to drive them off even with the Collector’s
technological advantages given how much they outnumbered them.”

“Most likely,” Shepard agreed, “on most colony worlds every able-bodied adult belongs to and trains at least a few hours every weekend with the colonies militia. They would have far outnumbered them.”

Jacob, who had been working at one of the workbenches along the wall, stopped what he was doing and came over to them. The former Corsair himself up, “Miranda, Commander,” he greeted them. Shepard was relieved he had listened to her request and stopped saluting her every time they met. She much preferred the simpler attention stance rather than having to exchange salutes every time she turned around, especially on smaller ships when everyone should be focused on their duty stations and not on her movements.

“Jacob,” Miranda responded, “The Commander feels we should make an effort to conceal our identities, both as Cerberus personnel and as humans, while operating in the Terminus Systems. She mentioned an armor that Alliance operatives frequently use in the Terminus to hide the fact that they’re humans?”

He looked puzzled for a moment before his expression cleared, “Yea, I think I know the armor you’re talking about. League made, they call it Anoydine Armor…”

Shepard nodded sharply as hearing the name refreshed her memory, “That’s it, bulky looking armor, but highly modifiable.”

Jacob nodded, “That’s it alright, and I know right where to get us some sets. We won’t even need to go into League space to get it. Hange Prime should have everything we need, I can just order it from them and have it picked up and delivered to us. It’s a really popular armor among mercenaries,” he continued, “pretty much just an outer shell as it’s expected that you’ll add your own underlay, outerlay, electronics and VI, kinetic barriers, protective coating or plating, and any mechanical augmentations you want to it. I can pull everything we will need for a basic armor set out of the standard Cerberus hardsuits we already have on hand. If we get something better,” Jacob shrugged to show this wasn’t a big deal, “then we just pull the armor apart and rebuild it with the new layer. The outer shell will be a matte black, but it will take almost any type of coating or plating you want to use. Very individualized.” He rocked back on his heels, “It doesn’t look like much, and certainly isn’t form fitting, but that’s what the mercenaries like about it. You can’t really tell if a person wearing it has only a base level of protection or something really advanced just from looking at it.”

“Its deceptive,” Shepard agreed with a nod, “and while we may get a few looks for wearing it, the person staring will probably be trying to figure the armor out rather than whose wearing it.”

The three of them discussed the specifics of the proposed purchase for a while longer. The number and basic size ranges of Anoydine Armor to buy, as well as the purchase of some component pieces. Shepard in particular wanted a specific type of asari made kinetic shield which she preferred for its protection level and exceptionally quick recharge speed.

As she and Miranda were leaving the armory the dark-haired woman inquired, “You don’t find that so many colonies have red light districts objectionable?”

Shepard glanced over, saw the slight frown creasing the other woman’s brow. “Not really,” she responded with a mild tone, “Those red-light sectors and the traffic they drew in were the only reason those colonies were still independent. Otherwise they would have had to invest much more heavily in their defenses or become part of the Alliance or League. The threat of slavers and pirates
is just part of the risks of living outside of Citadel space. You either pay your taxes to the Alliance or
League, pay for enough soldiers and defenses to deter attacks, or get attacked. So…no I don’t really
find it objectionable, that was their decision on how to handle the risk they faced.”

Miranda slowed to a halt and turned to face her, “And the fact that they really wanted asari
mercenaries for their abilities instead of human ones?” Now she sounded a bit agitated.

Shepard snorted and crossed her arms as she leaned against the nearest wall, “Honestly, no not
really. Asari simply have more time to learn their biotic abilities so they generally are more adept at
using them. And the fact that they actually metabolize small amounts of eezo over their lifespan
means that they will eventually be stronger than any human biotic. These are facts based on
biological differences between Humans and Asari. We can whine about the unfairness of it and feel
sorry for ourselves as much as we want, but neither will do anything to change reality. Personally, I
prefer not to waste my time like that and prefer to focus instead on what I can achieve.”

Before Miranda could respond, she continued, “And the colony authorities didn’t just prefer the asari
mercenaries to the human ones for their combat abilities. Asari mercenaries are less likely to start
fights or attempt to commit crimes,” Shepard smirked, “or at least not while they’re focused on
partying. A simple examination of the police records shows the difference in number of arrests
between the different merc groups. The only way you get more is to mix the two and thats mostly
due to the human mercs starting fights with the asari. As a result, the colonies make every attempt to
keep the Alliance based and League based mercenary groups separate. I know for a fact that most of
the sex workers preferred asari over humans because we employed quite a few of them as informants
and they were constantly leaving to go to League space. Asari generally treat sex workers much
better than humans. They don’t call them names, they don’t demean them, they pay them more, and
I’ve never heard of an asari harming or even threatening to harm a sex worker… So yes, the sex
workers, whether they were men or women, preferred asari to humans…not very surprising.”

Amanda almost laughed at the look of annoyance on Miranda’s face. “That may be,” the operative
snapped her mouth shut on the last word, only to inhale and start on what she obviously wanted to
address. “But that is one of the reason’s that Cerberus exists. Why should we simply accept those
biological differences when the ability to erase them is within our reach?”

Shepard had to admit that the other woman seemed sincerely passionate about this topic, but there
were more than a few problematic issues with the idea. “Using what methods? Your already
suspected of causing most of the accidental eezo exposures that killed almost 75 percent of those
affected. Exactly how many humans are you going to kill in your research to attain these goals?
How many dead humans lie at Cerberus feet in the attempt already? Over 100,000 combined from
those accidental exposures alone. And at the same time you’re searching for a way to strip the Asari
of their biotics? Don’t lie,” Shepard snapped out coldly as she saw the other woman was about to
interrupt her with another empty excuse, “that’s obviously what the research on Trident was about,
how do you think the League and Republics will react if you actually manage it?”

“We wouldn’t use it,” Miranda didn’t even try and deny the intent of the Trident research, “just the
threat of it would…”

“Would do what?” Shepard snapped incredulously, “you’re not stupid, Miranda, what exactly would
the Asari do if Cerberus did make such a threat? They would have to react decisively enough to
discourage the Hegemony and Union from trying the same thing. So, they would probably let the
Hierarchy do what they’ve wanted to do all these years since the First Contact War. Only this time
the Republics would help the Turians subdue Humanity, strip us of our colony worlds, and confine
us to Earth. Billions of humans would die and those biotic abilities that you want to develop
wouldn’t be of much use when we’re outnumbered by around 160 to 1. We don’t live in some
dream world Miranda, and Cerberus’ actions can have very serious consequences for the rest of
Humanity. You might want to start considering what those consequences might be before doing
anything likely to cause grievous repercussions.” She turned and walked toward the elevator at
the back of the Command Deck, only to come to a halt with her back to the operative. There was one
other thing she just had to add, “Not to mention that you can bet the Asari Republic has already
considered why Cerberus was testing that drug, and that knowledge has probably already damaged
the relationship between the Alliance and Republics even without Cerberus doing anything else other
than what you’ve already managed to do.”

Shepard was still fuming when she entered the elevator. Distantly she realized that she certainly
wasn’t exhibiting her normal level of control over her emotions, and it was a problem - that outburst
was a problem. “Ugg,” she growled as she forcefully tapped the next deck down, the Engineering
Deck, on the elevator’s destination panel. Might as well walk through Engineering and the Shuttle
Deck before heading up to Captain’s cabin, it would give her a chance to keep moving for a while
longer, and that would help her calm down. She was quite aware that by the end of her tirade
everyone in the CIC was staring at them two of them. Amanda reached up rubbed her forehead, that
hadn’t exactly been what she wanted to happen, but she had had a chance to think over the events on
Trident and the League’s reaction and realized something extremely troubling.

The Asari, whether League or Republic, were not going to react well to any government or group
actively researching how to take away their biotics. She was quite aware that part of the classified
briefing about the League had included speculation that the Terminus salarians, or Lystheni, had
made the mistake of researching something similar… The conflict was called the Two Week War,
and the reason behind it was a supposed terrorist attack utilizing a dirty radioactive bomb on Warlord
Seva’s personal estate. The entire League had responded to the attempted attack, and as the wars
name implied, overwhelmed all of the Lystheni colonies and outposts within a period of only two
weeks. Then, in just a few years, every Lystheni daltress had taken an asari bondmate - an asari
bondmate that was present for every hatching, and to whom every Lystheni hatchling was just as
imprinted upon as their daltress. That was still the case today, every new generation of Lystheni
females took an asari bondmate. It had seemingly become the custom for them…and it conveniently
allowed the asari of the League to keep the Lystheni both completely loyal to them and under their
absolute control.

Taken from a strictly historical perspective, the League’s reaction seemed a bit of overkill, but not
entirely unreasonable depending on the exact size and composition of the bomb in question. And
that was how the Systems Alliance had taken it…until SA Intelligence, quite by accident, uncovered
a very different reason behind the Leagues’ attack on the Lystheni. Something to do with a biotic
dampening bio-weapon they had been developing against the Asari. No, Shepard felt a chill go
through her, the Asari would not let what happened on Trident go without some level of response
and the last time someone had tried this the Asari had removed their ability to be a threat altogether.
And now Cerberus was striking dangerously close to doing something very similar to what the
Lystheni had done that earned them an imprint collar from the Asari. The Turians sometimes
sneeringly called humans Asari pets, but that might become a lot more literal than Humanity was
comfortable with if the Asari ever felt actually threatened by them. The Illusive Man seemed aware
of everything in the Alliance, was he aware of that particular report? And if he was aware of it, what
exactly what was he up to taking such a dangerous course of action? Maybe it simply wasn’t true?
Amanda shook her head, she simply didn’t know enough to even really make a good guess at this
point.

Nearly two hours later, Shepard concluded her conversation with engineers Kenneth Donnelly and
Gabriella Daniels. She stored Engineer Donnelly’s request for T6 FBA couplings in her omni-tool
and returned to the ship’s only elevator. At least this one moved much faster than the one in the original Normandy which had served both as a heavy equipment lift and an elevator. This new ship was large enough to have heavy equipment lifts in the central cargo area, which meant the central elevator’s sole purpose was to transport personnel from one deck to another.

As soon as the doors slid shut leaving her alone and out of sight, Shepard raised her hand and let her fingertips carefully explore what felt like a network of scars on both sides of her face. Underneath them, her face ached with a dull repetitive throb, bone deep and inescapable. It had been that way ever since she had woken up, though admittedly it did seem that it didn’t hurt as much now as it had a several hours ago, perhaps it was getting better. Shepard leaned back against the smooth steel wall behind her, she was exhausted. She had been moving and fighting with only short breaks to take a few hours nap in ever since Miranda had woken her in the medical bay to the sound of gunfire and explosions and the news that someone was trying to kill her almost a day ago. Or perhaps more accurately, Amanda thought with grim humor, attempting to re-kill her. Though she did wonder why Wilson had waited until then, it seemed as if it would have been so much easier just to fail at repairing her body, to have never let things get to the point where she could wake up at all.

Following their escape from the Lazarus Project’s base, she had been taken to another Cerberus facility where she had met, if that was the right term for the long distance holographic meeting, with the leader of Cerberus, the Illusive Man. It hadn’t been hard to deduce that he was absolutely certain the Reapers were behind the human colony abductions. From the moment he assured her that they could split ways if she didn’t find any evidence of the Reapers there, she had been sourly certain that she would find that evidence. Getting away from Cerberus wouldn’t be so simple, not after they had spent four billion credits to bring her back.

As for this afternoon, the crew had been polite to her as she made her tour of the new ship, but it was hard not to notice how their eyes went to her face and then shifted uncomfortably away. Miranda and Jacob hadn’t, but presumably they were more used to her appearance or at least had more self-control. Amanda tapped the Captain’s Cabin, the upper desk on the destination panel. Surely there would be a mirror there, it was past time for her to see clearly what she had only seen up until now in vague reflections in passing windows. She needed to know…to see, how much of herself was left and how much had been replaced.

A few extra bits and pieces Jacob Taylor had commented. Shepard was reasonably sure he had meant it to be reassuring, even though she hadn’t found much reassurance in it for she suspected it was rather more than a few extra bits and pieces. She remembered dying with a clarity that she wished she didn’t have, the hissing of escaping air from her combat suit that she had noticed as soon as the explosions from the ship had died away. The struggle to reach the back of her suit, to try to find some way to stop the escaping oxygen only to realize, as she gasped for each successively harder and harder to take breath, that it was the rebreather itself that was damaged and not just one of the hoses.

She had finally focused on the planet filling up her field of view, her mind sharpening, focusing in the same way it did when she was in the midst of battle, when everything seemed to slow to almost a crawl giving her time to analyze and react what was happening. That clarity of mind had brought with it the realization that she wouldn’t be able escape this, there would be no convenient last second place to hide this time from the death come calling for her. Her struggles stilled, her body going limp as she finally stopped trying to futilely take a breath. There had been a long moment of aching sorrow that she was leaving Liara alone mixed in with a plea to whatever might be listening that the young asari and her crew had gotten away safely and were still alive and unharmed and would remain so until their distress call was answered. As it became harder to focus, she had made a final silent cry of apology that she hadn’t been able to beat this to her lover, felt a chill of worry and fear
about the future and the threat of extinction facing all of them… and then everything had faded away. Her surrender to death should have been the end of her life.

Only it hadn't been...

The elevator doors opened and she stepped out into the short hallway. A door on her left, the only one in the hallway, was simply marked Deck 1 and then underneath in smaller lettering, Captain’s Cabin. The door opened and she entered the room taking in the spaciousness of it and of all things two large fish tanks built into the left wall. There was a work area on her right as she first entered separated by a large display case and stairs leading to a lower area where her bed and lockers for her clothing and armor were located. She took in everything with a long glance before turning to the bathroom which was on her immediate right as she first entered her quarters.

Given the bits of logs she had found and listened to during her fight through the station where she had first awoken, Amanda strongly suspected that all the skin on her body had needed replacement. Vacuum and the cold of space were not kind to unprotected flesh. Not to mention what must have happened to her body as the gravity from the nearby planet she had seen filling her vision before she died pulled her down onto its surface.

Entering the small room, she flicked on the light. The expected sink and mirror were indeed there along with a standard ships toilet beside the sink. She moved in front of the sink, looked with resolute grimness into the mirror. Her resolution lasted only a second before shifting into numbed horror. An orange-hued something could be seen where the open seams between the patches of skin grafts revealed what was underneath, it certainly wasn’t flesh. It wasn’t limited to her cheeks and jaw either, the same orange material also showed though a long unhealed area on her forehead. Dear Goddess, no wonder the crew had stared at her.

“In an effort to accelerate the process we’ve moved from simple organic reconstruction of the subject to bio-synthetic fusion. Initial results show promise.” Memory rose of listening to the log in numbed disbelief, suspecting strongly that the subject the woman was speaking of was her.

Was this the bio-synthetic Miranda Lawson had been talking about or something else? Cybernetics? Hell, how much of her face was even her face anymore? Amanda turned her head to examine her cheek more closely and caught the faint reddish glow from deep within the pupils of her eyes. She drew in a sharp startled breath as she jerked back from the mirror.

“When I first saw you, you were nothing more than meat and tubes. Anywhere else they would have stuck you in a coffin.” Jacob’s frankness had been numbing, as had his news that she had been… gone for two years.

Shepard swallowed heavily as she remembered the log entry she had found near the shuttle bay, the aborted move by Jacob to prevent her that she had stopped with one hard glare. “Test subject has been recovered but the damage is far worse than we initially feared. In addition to the expected burns and internal injuries from the explosion, subject has suffered significant cellular breakdown due to long term exposure to vacuum and subzero temperatures.”

“I guess there wasn’t much left of my eyes,” in the silence, her own husky sounding whisper startled her. She hadn’t realized she had spoken her thought aloud. How much of her had been left, she had been… salvageable she knew that, but just how much of this body was hers and how much of it wasn’t? With a grim expression she began taking off her clothes, it was time to see what the butcher’s bill was for this. The thought broke a grim bark of laughter from her. She already knew the butcher’s bill, four billion credits, and she had no doubt Cerberus intended to get their full value
back out of her.
The soaring notes of a flute like instrument rose in bright flashes of whitish-emerald above the steady midnight-green beat of a drum while the sound of strings interwove in flashes and swirls of forest-green and white amongst both, harmonizing and supporting the main melody of the song. The tempo of the song slowed in forest-leaf like dappled shimmerings of white, forest-green and midnight-green, like light beams though the leaves of a deeply shadowed jungle. Throughout the song her fingers danced over the matte black surface of the dual keyboard in front of her creating the music swirling in the air. Her biotics interacted with the sensitive electronics inside of the instrument to shift through the available sounds while her six fingers tapped to create a clear note, pressed to create a sustained tone, wavered to create vibrato tones, and glided to bend the note’s pitch up or down the octave.

With a shimmer of emerald, there was an alteration of the tonal quality and then her fingers were off again, playing over the surface while she closed her eyes and felt for the music with her órë. This time, while her fingers flowed over the surface of the pressure sensitive keyboard, she affected the notes with her biotics creating subtle changes in the tones with the mass effect fields. Smoothly shifting the notes upward in tone by lightening the field in one place while increasing it in another to lower the tone. The tone and tempo of the music shifted as her fingers flew over the keyboard in an intricate exchange of notes that her biotic field accentuated the amplitude of the sound waves, causing the notes to rise in a glorious crescendo of sound as the song reached towards its finale.

Her fingers stilled upon the keyboard, her four eyes opening as the emerald tones of her biotic field faded from around her body. The sound of applause caught her attention, and she turned in her seat to see her father standing in the doorway. She smiled, “Father, you are home earlier than I expected.”

“I was curious about your message,” he confessed as he straightened to his full height and entered the room. “You said you had been working on a method that would allow you to use biotics and sound to shatter any material with a lattice molecular structure.”

Pride tinged her órë as she rose from the bench, “I have, by using a barrier field to reinforce the
lattice structure and reduce the dampening effects of the material, it makes it easier to introduce a resonance field at the natural frequency of the material and shear it along the lattice.”

His four eyes blinked in surprise. “A barrier,” he repeated thoughtfully, “instead of a warp field, using its effect of inertial stillness to reinforce the structure of the material instead of disrupting it. An interesting application of the technique, where are the results of your experiments?”

“In here,” she responded with a wave and then respectfully waited for him to precede her before following along behind him into the next room. This was an almost empty room with strategically placed sound baffling to prevent echoes. She usually used it for making sound recordings of her compositions, but it also served well for this demonstration. She had placed a podium with a vice secured on top of it in the center of the room, on it were the results of her earlier experiments. Five metal bars, all of different compositions laid upon the podium, each of them neatly split along a fracture line. Her father halted in front of the podium, took the time to examine each of them, first by touch to see what he could determine from it and then by using his omni-tool for a more in-depth analysis. She remained silent, as was proper so as not to disturb him. He was still dressed in his armor, and she found it a sign of how seriously he was taking her experimentation that he had not even taken the time to change out of it before seeking her.

“You have more of these?” he inquired as he turned toward her, his scanning completed.

She nodded, “There are five more of each, I stored them on the bottom shelf of the podium.” She motioned toward the back side of the object in question.

Her father grunted his acknowledgment as he stepped around the podium, glanced down and then knelt to retrieve another set of bars. “Demonstrate this to me,” he commanded her as he secured one of the bars into place, “I will sense what you are doing as you are doing it.”

She nodded, “Yes father,” she acknowledged as she approached the podium and them waited until he came back around it to stand beside her. “This is a carbon steel bar,” she commented looking at the silvery metal, “if I did not know what it was I could scan it and have my omni-tool calculated its natural resonance frequency. However, I already know this from my earlier experiments, did you want me to duplicate that step father?” she inquired respectfully.

Her father shook his head, “That will be unnecessary, please go ahead and proceed with your demonstration.”

She raised her hand over the bar and waited as her father moved closer, placed one hand on her shoulder and then placed his hand over hers. She did not do anything else until she felt her father carefully attune himself to her biotic field, it would be dangerous for them both for her to proceed before he did so, otherwise their differing biotic fields might set off a biotic explosion as her father extended his órë to sense what she was doing with her own.

“First, I form a barrier,” she suited words to actions, willing her biotics to form the desired mass effect field as an emerald-white shimmer surrounded her hand. Her lower two eyes narrowed as she concentrated on extending the field over the bar and then willing the barrier to be as still and rigid as possible. As soon as she felt the barrier stabilize, she raised her other hand and formed a second, mass increasing, biotic field. She then drew in a breath and sang a pure C note through the midnight-green biotic field and observed the bar as she used the mass increasing field to modulate the tone.

Lower and lower until she could no longer hear the note itself, but only sense it through her órë. She felt the moment within her barrier when she reached the proper tone and the metal of the bar began to
vibrate along with the deep note. She immediately ceased modulating the tone and instead began increasing its intensity. Now she could see the bar vibrating as well as feel it in her órë.

Ping, she heard the loud retort as the piece of steel abruptly snapped cleanly in two. She fell silent and released her concentration at the same time letting both mass effect fields fade away as the upper piece of the steel bar fell onto the podium, leaving one sheared off piece still standing upright in the vice.

“Hmm,” her father hummed thoughtfully as he stepped away. “There is a biotic power, shear, that is similar to this.”

“Oh,” her head dipped in dismay, of course a similar technique was already known to actual warriors.

“No,” he turned to look at her, “that is more brute force and depends on raw biotic strength to produce two opposing mass effect fields to physically break the material’s molecular bonds. It is very exhausting to use on a mass of any significant size or density. This, I could tell, actually uses very little biotic force, but it requires more understanding of how to use mass effect fields to modulate sounds as well as the ability to hold multiple finely-controlled biotic fields simultaneously.” He smiled, “I am impressed my daughter, both with your control over your biotics and with the way you utilized your musical training to create a new and very useful technique.”

Her father was a high ranking governmental official and a Dragaran member of the highly respected Order of Varnor, for him to acknowledge this… She drew in a surprised and elated breath, “I am honored Father.”

The dream faded intoindistinctness as the sound of a violin like instrument playing a haunting refrain took over the focus of her attention. Amanda's silvery grey eyes sleepily opened as the solemn notes played enticingly in her memory. Still half asleep she frowned, the music sounded so familiar yet she couldn't quite place it. The crease between her dark eyebrows deepened as she realized that she couldn’t identify the instrument playing it either, the sound was violin-like, but it was not a violin. Then wisps of the dream prior to the music made themselves known and all of her sleepiness abruptly fled in the face of these new memories. She sat up, staring into the darkness of the room, conscious of the sound of her quickened breathing, that hadn't been her. That - the image of a plated, wedge-shaped head, four eyes, and three pairs of slit-like nostrils filled her mind - hadn’t even been a human.

Amanda consciously forced her breaths to slow, then concentrated on the images in her mind’s eye, bringing them into what was actually a rather disconcertingly detailed focus. The dream seemed so very real, as if she had actually been the young prothean woman. She could still feel the daughter’s love and great respect for her father, and could recall every detail of both his appearance and the appearance of the two rooms she had seen in the dream.

He was tall and imposing, and had worn gleaming reddish-colored armor with inlaid golden embellishments. The thick, layered carapace of his wedge-shaped head was grayish-brown in color, while his two sets of eyes were bright yellow and had two distinct pupils. Now that she thought about it, Shepard realized, her field of vision had been oddly wider, as if she could see both in front of her and around the sides of her head. The colors she recalled seemed subtly different from what she could see as a human as well. Had…her thought stilled as if she didn’t really want to consider it…yet…had that been a Prothean memory? One from the beacon, or, she considered, from the Cipher? But why now? She had nightmares from the beacon, but nothing like this and nothing like this after getting the Cipher on Feros from the asari Shiala.
The only thing different between now and then was...the fact that she had died and Cerberus had rebuilt her body to bring her back to life. She knew her body had been badly damaged, that she had been exposed to sub-zero temperatures, had she been frozen? What had been the state of her brain and how had Cerberus preserved her cognitive functions and memory? She ran one hand distractedly over the fuzz of her newly growing in hair, how to find out though was the question. She certainly didn’t want to just spit out that she seemed to be dreaming about some young Prothean woman’s life. Shepard snorted, even if it had been the Alliance who brought her back she might not want to just blurt that one out and that went double for Cerberus.

Her mind worked over the problem, her best bet she suspected was to simply ask Dr. Chakwas if the older woman knew anything about how exactly her memories had been preserved. Not at all an unreasonable question, and it shouldn’t raise any questions in anyone’s mind that she was curious about how exactly Cerberus had managed to bring her back to life. Shepard had stopped by the medical bay earlier after finding out that the older woman had been recruited along with Joker. Karen, it turned out was actually taking a leave of absence as opposed to having left the Alliance altogether like Joker. Unfortunately, if anyone found out she was working with Cerberus, the Alliance would quickly pull her clearance and probably bring her up on charged for working with a known terrorist group.

Shepard was humbled really, both of them were risking quite a lot in order to be here with her. The same with the two engineers Donnelly and Daniels down in engineering. They were all here solely because of her, not because they agreed with Cerberus’s human supremacist ideas. Amanda sighed, she was grateful they were here for her, but on the other hand they had likely all thrown away their careers because of it.

She slid her feet over to the side of the bed, stood, and glanced over at the clock. It was only 0300 hrs. and she could still feel the fatigue in her body, but now her mind was racing. There would be no going right back to sleep for her, not after that dream...memory. That technique, Shepard wasn’t sure whether or not she could duplicate it. Before her death she definitely could not have, but now? She wasn’t sure if it was the new L5n implant vice her old L3 implant or something else Cerberus had done, but her biotic abilities were much, much stronger than before and her conscious control over the mass effect field she generated easier and more precise than it had ever been. That was not all though, she was also using her biotics in ways she never had before and had no idea how she was doing some of the things she was doing. It was almost as if she had learned entirely new muscle mnemonics while she was dead.

Shepard had been taught to use her biotics to hasten her movement speed in a manner similar to the way krogan biotics added speed and force to their charges. Her biotics’ trainers at the Academy had called what they taught her charging, and she had used it, as most biotic vanguards did, to move from one firing position to another more swiftly or close with the enemy faster. The first time it, with it being the anomalous charge, had occurred had been on Lazarus Station, shortly after she had woken. She had needed to keep her momentum against a group of mechs firing upon her and Jacob. One of them was standing in a perfect location off to the side, next to a stack of containers which she could very conveniently use for cover after taking it out. Shepard had noticed that the dark blue mass effect field swirling around her seemed more powerful than she recalled, but had chosen to ignore that technicality as she was partially exposed to the mechs fire and, at that time, it seemed much more important to move than ponder the before and after difference in mass effect fields. Then she had charged; only instead of moving swiftly across the distance, she had covered it in what seemed like an instant of time and had impacted against the mech with such force that it had slammed into the containers behind it hard enough to not rise again. Thankfully her barrier had been correspondingly stronger as well, or the impetus of the impact would have left her on the floor as
Differences, differences, first her biotics and now this dream…and, she hesitated to add this even within the privacy of her own mind, maybe her memories. She closed her eyes and dipped her head, thinking about the last. Today walking through the ship, she couldn’t help but mentally compare it with The Normandy, her ship, her actual ship. Those memories they just seemed…very real when she thought about them, all the way down to the ambient sounds and smells. Maybe whatever it was they did would fade, Amanda hopefully thought as she straightened and opened her eyes.

In any case, that technique the female prothean had developed, could she replicate it? First there had been the barrier field, Shepard raised one hand, and concentrated with her brows furrowed. Whitish blue energy formed around her hand and arm, and Shepard focused on it, refining it. Rigid and still, literally meant to reinforce the lattice-like molecular structure found in most rigid materials. Seconds passed and still it evaded her, finally Shepard shook her head and let the field fade. She wasn’t getting it right, how had the prothean done it? She closed her eyes and focused on the memory dream, recalling everything she could about it. Finally she lifted her arm, focused, formed the barrier and concentrated. Rigid and still…she focused on the dream and then finally felt her barrier stabilize in the same manner. Slowly she opened her eyes, keeping her focus on maintaining the barrier. The first thing Amanda noticed was that the biotic energy field appeared unusually regular, the bluish-white lines of mass effect energy forming a coherent pattern in the air. This was how the prothean’s field had looked as well, Shepard elatedly realized. She had done it! Amanda held the barrier for almost a minute longer, trying to memorize exactly how it felt to hold and maintain it, then finally let it dissipate.

That was one of two mass effect fields from the dream recreated, the second one though she suspected would actually be harder to master. More intriguing though, using biotics to manipulate sound. Once, before slavers had killed her family on Mindoir, she had dreamed of pursuing a career in the arts. She had dreamed of being a famous musician, dancer and actor. Now she was considering how to use sound and her biotics to rip apart doors and walls. With a slight shake of her head, Shepard snorted in bemusement, how things had changed since those innocent times.

She sighed, none of this reminiscing would get her any closer to figuring out how to alter sound with her biotics. Since it had been so effective before, Shepard closed her eyes once again and focused on the memory dream, this time concentrating on exactly what the female prothean had done to modulate the sound of her voice. How she had formed the mass effect field, exactly how it had felt. It had been a mass increasing field, which made sense as sound was caused by the molecules of a medium vibrating. If you increased the mass of that molecule with a mass effect field, then just like the difference between a thin string on a guitar and a thick string, the pitch of the sound would be lower. When Shepard thought she had it, she inhaled and then softly sang a simple mid-range C note. She heard the drop in tone as the sound passed through the biotic field, but feeling it as the female prothean had felt it…the fine-tuned ability to sense and manipulate the sound wave was just not there.

The female prothean had been able to sense the sound through her órë. Unlike everything else that had been said between father and daughter, that one word didn’t seamlessly translate in her mind, but perhaps biotic aura was closest to it. The field one biotic could sense around another biotic when they were close enough. Amanda’s brow furrowed as she considered the problem, perhaps if she brought the mass increasing field closer to her it would help her sense what the female prothean had been able to sense. She released the mass increasing field around her raised hand, then brought her hand in closer, only a few inches from her lips. Slowly she reformed the biotic field, and this time it certainly it felt as if she had a greater sense of the mass increasing field. Once again she inhaled and then held a mid-range C note on the slow exhale. This time she felt it, not as clearly as in the dream.
memory, but she could finally sense the effect of the mass increasing field upon the sound wave. Lower, lower, lower, she increased the Mass Effect field until she could no longer even hear the deep pitch and then reversed the effect, lightening the field and raising the note to a piercing high tone.

Shepard let the sound and the mass effect field fade, considering the difference between how she had just sensed the note and how the prothean female had been able to sense it. She felt half deaf to be honest, she had been able to barely sense and manipulate the note compared to what she remembered of the prothean female’s level of sensitivity and control. Why was that? She seemed to recall that the prothean female had just felt it, nothing special had seemed necessary for the effort. Sensing with her órë, how exactly had the female prothean sensed with her órë?

Shepard frowned, her brow furrowing and her lips curved downward as she pondered the question, trying to dredge up every piece of information she could recall from the memory dream…

“Again,” she said patiently, “focus your thoughts, and bring your órë into focus with mine.” She waited until she felt the male xenthan, Arlox Ethian, do so before continuing, “Now concentrate on feeling what I am doing with my órë.” With the xenthan’s green fur covered arm on top of her own, she reached forward with her three-fingered hand toward the data entry device, a common and essential piece of equipment in any government office. “Activate it like so,” she deftly manipulated the faint electrical field or órë that extended a few feet in every direction around her body in a particular pattern which the console’s sensors detected and responded by activating. “Then identify yourself,” now she actually relaxed her órë, let it return to its natural state which also served as a unique biometric identifier, and her name appeared on the screen. “At this point you would place your hand on the data input sensor and recite your name and activation code to enter the system, but first let us get the initial activation and identification steps correctly completed before proceeding any further.” She lowered her arm and the xenthan did the same, “I will harmonize with your órë and then you will attempt the initial activation stage while I monitor you.”

“As you say, Elder Instructor Lindariel,” the Arlox agreed respectfully, as he lifted his arm and waited for her to place her arm on top of his.

Xenthan fur was very soft, she thought as she did so, then scolded herself for getting distracted as she harmonized her órë with his. “Proceed please,” she instructed him when she was ready. Service Recruit Arlox Ethian had been preliminarily accepted for government service in the Prothean Empire, and had been through the implantation surgery to augment his biotic abilities nearly two weeks ago. His new implant would allow him to interact with prothean technology, now he had to learn the specific techniques necessary to pass his entrance exam to actually become employed in the service of the Empire. She frowned as she felt the slight betraying variance in his órë as Arlox attempted to once again activate the data entry console. “Hmm,” she murmured thoughtfully, “I believe I understand why you are failing.”

She lifted her arm from his, took a few steps away from him and then stared at him sternly, “Have you been dutifully practicing the exercises I showed you a week ago? You have employed me as your instructor, and I will do my best to teach you what you need to know, but you must also do your part to succeed. Certainly the Empire will not tolerate you expecting someone to do your work for you, we must all strive to do our best in order for us to defeat these machine forces, the Metacons, that seek to destroy all our lives.”

Service Recruit Ethian drew himself up stiffly. “Of course,” he assured her, but then dipped his head in evident embarrassment, “but I am having difficulty with them,” he reluctantly admitted.
She stared at him for a moment, then with a slight exhale nodded her understanding. He was perhaps not the brightest student she had ever taught, but he appeared to be sincerely trying his best, and she could feel his gratitude for her teaching with every touch. It certainly made for a welcome change to some of the more privileged young students she taught during the day. Take Adlanna Nayzle, who was one of her more gifted students, but despite having some of the best tutors train her, still lacked the mental discipline needed for proper mental communications. The young woman should have excellent control of her thoughts, as all children were taught how to focus their thoughts from a young age. Adlanna however, seemed to have little control over hers. Odd thoughts kept intruding and the Elder Instructor had no desire to know who the young woman thought was cute or otherwise. That was the drawback of working at one of the more prestigious academies in all of the empire. Some of the students were truly gifted and joys to work with because they truly wished to learn, and others were the children of the rich and powerful, and some of them were...less than enthusiastic learners.

She nodded, honestly she had expected as much with what she had just felt in his órë as he attempted to activate the data entry console. “Then let us go over them again together. You must first master the fine control of your órë, or you will never be able to become proficient in the skills that will be required of you as a civil servant of the Empire.” Thus they went through another hour of training, with Lindariel patiently going over the exercises and then monitoring Arlox’s attempts to copy her. She had to correct some of his efforts, but by the end of their session she felt that he had made significant improvement in his ability to control his órë and would hopefully be able to master the necessary skills to be accepted into the Empire’s service within the next few weeks.

The two of them parted for the evening and as the elder prothean made her way back to her home her thoughts wandered back to the annoying interaction with Adlanna which had occurred only a few hours ago. “Focus Adlanna,” she sternly admonished the young woman, “your thoughts are drifting.”

The young woman said sulkily, “Yes Lindariel.”

Abruptly breaking the mental connection between them, Lindariel straightened. Such impertinent familiarity was completely unacceptable!

The young woman immediately withered underneath her stern glare, “Pardon, Elder Instructor Lindariel, my apologies to you.”

She stared down at the young woman until Adlanna seemed to realize that she had truly stepped beyond the bounds of proper behavior this time. “I accept your apology,” she finally allowed, “but your behavior will still be noted in my daily report to the Chief Instructor.” She paused for a tiva before adding, "Who will doubtless forward it to your parents."

All four of the young woman’s eyes snapped to her, their pupils narrowing in shock, doubtless she had thought the apology would be enough. It was not, the young woman had skirted on the edges of showing proper respect to her and the other instructors for the last time as far as she was concerned. The elder was tired of her behavior. Let her family deal with it, no matter that he was the owner of Hayll Nayzle and greatly respected by many, his daughter’s behavior, if not corrected soon, would bring great dishonor upon him and his family.

“Now again,” Lindariel instructed giving the young woman little time to recover from the news of her punishment, “strengthen your mental barriers, clear your mind and push aside all other thoughts, focus only on the information you want to convey, bring your órë into harmony with mine, initiate the mental connection and then open the way only to those thoughts you wish to share.”
Music interrupted her thoughts, causing her to slow to listen to the unfamiliar sounds and singing. What language was this? She knew almost ten different languages, but this sounded like none of them and where was it coming from?

Lindariel opened her eyes, and saw a completely unfamiliar room. She looked around in alarm, what had just happened? She had just been walking along the pathway to her apartment, how could she have suddenly been transported here? She straightened her shoulders, she was Elder Instructor Lindariel not some youngster to be frightened by the unknown, she calmed herself by pure force of will and then took a second more careful look around. She was standing by a chair and table, over to her left side there was a resting platform, though not like the resting platforms used by her race. Along the wall on the left side of the resting platform there was a long tank filled with water and a few plants, but nothing else.

She turned to examine the rest of the room, three steps led up to the next area and the wall that divided it was transparent with carefully placed dowels in between the two panes. Some type of display case evidently, she decided after a moment, but currently empty. Actually, she looked around the room again, then glanced at the resting platform with its rumpled sheets. If it weren’t for them she would think that no one was in residence here, the room was so bare of any personal adornment.

She went up the steps, ah now here was something that looked familiar, Lindariel thought as she saw what was obviously some type of data input device upon the desk to her left. She sat down in the chair and as soon as she did one of the objects on the desk suddenly activated, displaying a picture of an alien. Lindariel reached over and picked it up curiously, what race was this? So strange looking and yet…familiar? Liara, the strange word came to her mind, but how did she know….

Shepard, she was Amanda Athene Shepard, and not Lindariel Ealothen, Elder Instructor. Amanda just stood beside the desk for a long moment, Liara’s picture in her hands as she considered what had just happened to her. This time hadn’t been a dream, she had just relived a piece of that prothean woman’s life so vividly to the point that she hadn’t even realized that she wasn’t Elder Instructor Lindariel Ealothen. The song playing changed, and Shepard realized that what had brought her out of Lindariel’s memories had been the alarm she had set the night before activating to play music in ever increasing volume until she woke and acknowledged it.

She blankly listened to the music playing for several more seconds before she finally drew in a deep breath and placed the picture of Liara back on her desk. She glanced over at the open terminal, wondered what Lindariel would have made of it had she not been brought out of the woman’s memory. There was no telling she decided after a moment, but she suspected the prothean woman would have went poking around trying to figure out what was going on regardless of the fact that English at least wasn’t familiar to her. Ten languages…Amanda was impressed, Elder Instructor Lindariel certainly hadn’t lacked in intelligence, she chuckled ruefully remembering how the woman had responded to suddenly not being where she expected, or determination and courage for that matter. Lindariel had certainly freaked out less than she had just freaked out over reliving the prothean’s life and she was a N7 while the prothean had been a teacher. Shepard reached up and ran a hand over her face, Goddess, she wasn’t even certain how to think of what had just happened since Lindariel hadn’t just existed, only the prothean’s memories in her own mind.

The volume of the music playing increased another step, reminding Shepard that she had yet to acknowledge the alarm. She took the stairs down and crossed over to it, tapping it to turn it off. Turning she sat down upon the bed, her thoughts focused on the prothean memories she had just relived. She had hints in the memories of the musician, but now she was sure that Prothean society
was rather strict and honor based. It almost reminded her of some of Earths Asian cultures. And
damn, Elder Instructor Lindariel was one scary woman. Shepard was happy she hadn’t had any
teachers like that in high school. If she had, the entire class would have probably been quiet and
awake in an effort not to attract her attention to any one of them, much less mouthing off to her as
that one teenager had foolishly done.

As unexpected and disconcerting as she had found the experience of completely reliving Lindariel’s
memories, Shepard had to admit that she now had exactly the information she needed to further
develop her control over her órë or biotic aura. The different ways the Protheans used their biotic
aura was intriguing, she knew that the Asari were able to harmonize their biotic auras in order to
combine their biotics together, but they, at least to Shepard’s knowledge, did not use them for
identification or as a primary method of interacting with their technology. The Protheans seemed to
use a combination of their biotic auras along with their ability to touch read both things and each
other to interact with almost all of their technology. No wonder the beacons were made to download
information directly into their user’s minds, everyone who came into contact with them was either
prothean or…her eyes narrowed thoughtfully, had one of the special implants Lindariel had
mentioned that allowed them to mimic the ability.

She shook her head, her mind shying away from the thought, she didn’t want to get caught in yet
another memory. There were bits and pieces of Lindariel’s memories now floating around her mind,
quite a lot of them for the prothean had been a teacher for almost three hundred years. Shepard’s eyes
widened, she doubted anyone realized that the Protheans were fairly long-lived species, though not
nearly as long as the asari or krogan. Lindariel’s memories indicated that she expected to live until
she was around six hundred or so years old. She also suspected she knew how the Thorian, for now
she was almost certain these memories were from the Cipher, had absorbed Lindariel’s memories.
Fifty thousand years ago, the building complex they had found the Thorian under had been an
educational complex with both an academy for the younger students and what would be equivalent
to a university for the older ones.

Shepard glanced over at the time, she had turned on the alarm for a reason. In just a few hours they
would be leaving for the prison ship Purgatory to pick up the mysterious Jack. That meant that she
needed to start getting ready now. If she were quick with her shower and breakfast, maybe she
would have time to practice some of the exercises Lindariel had taught to Arlox before getting into
her armor and going down to the armory for her weapons.
Shepard had sensed that something was wrong the first time she had met Warden Kuril, it was something in his voice and in his manner which gave it away. Therefore his betrayal, when it came, was actually something of a relief. A confirmation of her suspicions, and an end to the pretense of behaving as if nothing was wrong. Not to mention that it gave her something to do besides focusing on ignoring the claustrophobic feeling the helmet was giving her, and the whispering in the back of her mind about whether or not there was actually enough air to breathe. When she got through with this mission she would definitely be visiting Chakwas to take care of this before it got any worse, she vowed.

Through the speakers in her helmet she caught the sound of a derisive snort from Miranda as Kuril informed them that they had more value as prisoners than as buyers. They had sent in the FENRIS mech right after the Warden’s announcement. These were one of the quicker mechs, and were usually equipped with very powerful taser devices in their ‘heads’ which were powerful enough to shock most sentients into unconsciousness. Miranda never let them get close enough however, summoning her biotics and sending a quick singularity toward the only entrance into the room, the doors that separated it from the hallway outside. They might be trapped in here, but the single entrance funneled their attackers into a very convenient kill zone. As soon as the singularity pulled the four FENRIS mechs into it, Shepard announced, “Detonating,” for Miranda’s benefit and sent a warp in its direction. The resulting detonation from the two dark energy fields coming into contact with one another was powerful enough to destroy the mechs caught up within its effect.

Not wanting to lose their current attack tempo or the initiative they had gained with it, Shepard called out, “Move up!” knowing that the microphone in her helmet would securely transmit the command to both of her teammates. She then immediately charged toward the door, winding up just beside of the opening. She took a quick glance around the doorway as she pulled a few grenades from her utility belt. There were six guards rushing toward her position, and without over thinking it she
summoned her biotics and thrust forward her arm, releasing an unusually, at least for her...or the old her, powerful shockwave. The biotic attack lifted and pushed back the attackers, leaving them sprawled upon the ground - vulnerable. Shepard activated two of the grenades, set one to fragment and the other to incinerate and then threw them one at a time down the hall, then ducked back into cover. A second later and the two grenades detonated one after the other, the incinerate first followed by the flash of the explosion and screams and then the fragmentation grenade which cut off quite a bit of the screaming. She glanced out once again...took in the smears of blue blood on the floors and walls. Not many of the turians were moving and those that were - she took aim and began firing.

"On your left," Jacob announced as he pounded up. Throwing himself into position on the other side of the doorway he began firing as well, his body shimmering with the bluish-white energy of a barrier. He was a bit late, but at least he was here now. Miranda...she spared a quick glance behind her, spotting the other woman, her body also tightly wreathed in the indigo-white of a barrier kneeling behind a table. It provided almost no protection, but did give her and excellent field of fire down the hallway. It only took the three of them a few seconds to mop up the few guards who remained alive after the two grenades.

Shepard leaned out into the hallway once again. The clear armored glass that lined the hallways gave her an excellent view of both the hallway in front of her and the branching hallway that led to the super-max wing, both were clear at the moment. Odd, the guards should have prepared for this and should have setup defensive positions as soon as they entered the room, thought Shepard. Had they really expected a few mechs and guards to be enough to deal with them? Still she was not about to complain at the enemies’ failure to properly prepare some sufficiently manned defensive positions. With one hand she motioned toward the branch about 7 meters away, “Moving,” she alerted the other two just seconds before she suited action to words. Honestly at this point, Shepard thought as she took cover at the intersection, she wasn’t exactly sure if she were still charging or performing something that previously she had thought only asari capable of with their innate level of control over their natural biotics - a flash step. “Jacob, Miranda other side of the hallway, Miranda you’re on rear guard, watch out for reinforcements from the way we came in.”

No sooner had the two of them gotten into position than the prison guards showed that they did have some tactical sense. The doors opened from the way they had come in, disgorging more FENRIS mechs and guards at the same time as Jacob’s warning shout about more guards coming from the super-max wing. There was no cover here and they were about to be flanked, should she engage or retreat? “Suppressive fire, Jacob, fix them in place,” as he glanced over at her, his disagreement with her command clear in his expression, she waved her hand toward the guards coming from the super-max wing, “Miranda and I will take care of the others.”

She heard him utter a sharply questioning “Shepard?” right before she flash-stepped, and definitely this time she knew it was a flash step, over to the side of the hallway across from the dark-haired woman. She threw out her hand and concentrated on extending her personal barrier into a spherical shaped bubble that covered the entire group. Concentration, focus and control, Shepard thought, recalling both Lindariel’s instructions and what she had learned from the dream of the musician. Her barrier firmed, the indigo-white streamers of dark energy arranging themselves into an ordered lattice. She would have never tried this before her death, for she had been only an average at best biotic and extending her barrier like this would have provided at best only a few seconds of protection. The advancing guards were firing upon them, but from the inside of the bluish-white sphere the impacts simply rippled the mass effect field like raindrops seen from below the surface of a still pond.

Out of the corner of her eye Shepard caught Miranda staring at her wide-eyed, and quickly snapped out, “More shooting and less staring Lawson, singularity then grenades followed up by a warp.” That jarred the Cerberus operative out of her stupefaction, as the other woman quickly began following her instructions, allowing Shepard to focus her attention on maintaining the barrier that
was protecting all of them. Lindariel’s instructions, beyond training in the fine control of mass effect fields, could also be labeled ‘How To Get The Most Out Of Every Joule Of Your Biotics’. Shepard had noticed that when she had managed to get ready in time to take a half hour and practice a few of them. She had grabbed an energy bar afterward, but had not really found herself really needing it. The techniques did focus on control, but a lot of that was producing the minimal amount of dark energy needed for the biotic power to be effective. As a result, right now she wasn’t really expending that much of her biotic reserves to hold the spherical barrier in place. In scale of difficulty, keeping her focus on exactly how the barrier should be formed in order maintain its highly-coherent dark energy field felt like it took more effort than actually powering it.

The triple assault she had suggested to Miranda proved highly successful, the other biotic casting a singularity right in the middle of the oncoming groups formation which had pulled several of them off their feet. The operative had immediately followed it up with two grenades and then without pausing a threw a warp field after them, detonating her own singularity. All of this took place within the span of less than ten seconds, quite impressive thought Shepard. That had left only two FENRIS mechs and one guard still alive and able to fight at the end of it and they were closing upon them fast. With a grunt of effort Shepard expanded her barrier field, knocking back the oncoming mechs and guard. Still recovering from the effort of expanding her barrier Shepard choose to simply lift her rifle and start firing at them, for the moment letting her kinetic shield protect her from the return fire of the sole remaining prison guard. A few bursts later, first one and then the other mech were destroyed, and the guard quickly followed them.

Shepard drew in a breath as she whirled around, reforming her personal biotic barrier as she did so to reinforce her shields. Now doubly protected, she took a moment to assess the situation in the other corridor. Jacob had done an excellent job of fixing the second attack team of four guards in place, but without her extended barrier he was having to duck back into cover, which was giving them time to advance.

“Could use a little help here,” he said, reinforcing her assessment. A quick flash step took Shepard across the opening to the other side, where she set herself against the wall. She focused on what she wanted to do, trusting in her newly strengthened biotic abilities - yet another question for Chakwas - in the next second she banished the distracting thought, leaned out and ‘extended’ her biotics toward the nearest guard. The bluish-white mass effect field surrounded him, lifting the turian guard from his feet to hang suspended and flailing in the air. If he yelled, she didn’t know for the guards were just as armored up as her own team. She concentrated, altering the effect of the field and pulled the floating turian toward her, then with an alacrity she certainly hadn’t been able to pull off before, and with as much force as possible, reversed the dark energy field and threw him at the oncoming guards.

The guard slammed into the others with enough power that they impacted with the clear walls of the corridor with enough force to actually crack the armored glass. The guard she had thrown, and one of the guards he had slammed into did not rise again and the two remaining guards did not live for much longer. A quick glance around confirmed that this was the last of their attackers, at least for the moment.

“How did you do that?!” Miranda exclaimed, striding up to her. “No human has yet managed to successfully perform a charge much less a flash-step, and your files implied you knew only how to form the basic personal barrier that the Alliance teaches all its biotics.”

“You mean we knew of no human who knew how to charge until just now,” Jacob corrected her and was rewarded with an annoyed glare for his effort.

“Not the time or place for a discussion on it,” Shepard snapped at them with a disapproving frown. “Let’s move,” she ordered with a wave up the hallway, “before more reinforcements arrive.” Suiting
action to words, Shepard took off at an easy jog up the hallway, completely ignoring the other woman’s protests. She jogged past the quartet of guards they had just killed and toward the doorway leading into the super-max wing of the prison where hopefully Jack would be located. “Jacob left side, Miranda right side,” she ordered the two of them, motioning to where she wanted them to stand on either side of the big double door.

Miranda shot her a look as the operative passed by, “We’re going to talk about it as soon as we return to the station. I’ll get the lock.”

“Appreciated,” Shepard replied to the last while ignoring the first and then focused on strengthening her barrier. As the other woman worked on hacking the lock open, she took position next to Jacob. Her weapon was drawn and readied for the moment when the door opened, for there was no way to know what exactly they would find waiting for them on the other side. It turned out to be a single unarmored turian, standing in front of a console which was itself in front of a floor to ceiling windowed wall.

The turian turned toward them, “Shepard just unlocked…” that was as far as he got before she flash-stepped into the room, raised her arm and pulled him away from the console with her biotics. Really, she thought, surprised at the ease with which she transitioned from flash step to biotic pull, the more she used her biotics the easier it seemed to use them. Propelled by her pull, the turian rolled across the floor, finally coming to a rest face-down a few feet away from her. Once more she extended the field, this time to raise him into the air with one hand while with the other she reached out and yanked his sidearm, a pistol, from his hand. “Someone turn off that comm call and re-lock the door… maybe this time with a better encryption code.” She took time to look around the room and noticed another door, and frowned at it. That gave them two entrances they needed to worry about guarding.

“I’ll get the console,” Jacob offered as he jogged over to it.

“I’ll get the door,” Miranda responded as she turned back toward the one they had just come through.

“See if you can do something about that second one as well please,” Shepard commented as she moved so that she could both keep an eye on her turian prisoner and the two doorways. After that she waited for Jacob to tell her the console was no longer transmitting before asking, “Jacob, how does it look over there for finding this Jack?”

“Actually,” he quickly responded, “Her cell is that one down there, they keep her in cryo-stasis. But that’s the end of the good news, the bad is that I can’t figure out a way to get her out of cryo without also releasing every prisoner in this cell block.”

“Hmm,” she murmured thoughtfully, as she watched Miranda finish locking down the one door and turn to the other one, “maybe we can find an alternative to that.” She turned to her captive, who had been steadily threatening them with what would happen once the guards subdued them as he attempted to struggle against the biotic field holding him. Turning on the speakers in her helmet so the turian could hear her she said, “So my teammate over there tells me we have to unlock this whole cell block in order to get Jack down there out.”

“You can’t do that!” the turian interrupted her with a yell, “these are some of the worse criminals in the galaxy. Murders and killers all of them.”

“Then give me an alternative,” she responded in a cold tone, “otherwise I’ll have no choice but to do just that. One way or another, I am leaving with Jack.”

“But I can’t!” the turian, a male with reddish colony markings shook his head, sounding frantic. “The
Warden just locked down the wing from central control. I can’t help you even if I wanted to! I’m telling the truth!”

Shepard glanced over toward Jacob who nodded, “From what I can tell he is telling the truth,” he assured her, “the lock down came from a console with higher security precedence than this one. It can’t override it. I have a program to hack it open, but as I said it will override the entire wing.”

“That’s unfortunate then,” Shepard responded, looking back at the turian, “unless you can make a suggestion in the next five seconds I’m going to have to order him to unlock the wing.”

Now the turian really looked frantic, “You can’t do that! Look, maybe if you got local access you could do it by over-riding the local console by her cell, but there are three YMIR mechs guarding it.”

“Her?” Shepard had been assuming this Jack was a male. She chuckled, “So you’ve got her in cryo and still have three YMIR’s assigned to her? What do you expect her to do from cryo?”

“You don’t know, she’s crazy!” the turian assured her earnestly. “She hates everyone and everything. You don’t want to un-thaw her, really you don’t!”

Shepard shrugged, “Yes I do, now you’ve been very cooperative so…” she pulled the now shouting turian closer and then very precisely struck him across the head with the butt of her rifle. Releasing the dark energy field, she stared down at the now unconscious guard, “Tie him up Jacob, then let’s see about his suggestion.”

“Oh it,” Jacob replied, the barrier field around him fading as he came over while reaching into his hip pouch to pull out a restraining tie.

While he started restraining the turian, Shepard strode over to the windowed wall to stare down into the room beyond. As the guard had mentioned there were three motionless YMIR mechs standing in off-mode position on either side of the room facing Jack’s cell. The cell itself was halfway lowered into the floor, probably where it interfaced with the mechanism that maintained Jack’s cryo-stasis. Off to one side she saw a console; if the guard hadn’t lied, that was where they might be able to unlock just this one cell.

“The quickest way out of here is just to unlock the entire cell block,” Miranda strode over, her omni-tool already raised and active. “The prisoners will keep the guards too busy to organize another attack against us.”

With a very annoyed growl, Shepard stepped in front of her. “You will cease trying to hack this console or you will never go on another mission with me,” her tone was cold and clear. “The entire Terminus uses this prison ship. The Warden and guards might be corrupt, but if we let these prisoners go and they escape then the blame will be placed on the few humans out here…again. They don’t need that, especially coming so soon after Cerberus’ Trident debacle.” She snorted in derision, “Unless that’s Cerberus’ plan, to force the humans out here to return to Citadel space. If so, then you’re doing an excellent job of it.”

“That’s not our plan!” Miranda ground out, her face was flushed in anger. “Fine,” she growled as she deactivated her omni-tool and took a step back, “but how were you even planning to get down there, much less deal with those YMIRs. You will recall how difficult the single one on Freedom’s Progress was to deactivate.”

Shepard allowed herself to relax as the operative stood down, “They are in monitoring mode right now, depending on their self-preservation settings it might not be very difficult at all.”
“Yea,” Jacob grunted as he rose from where he had just finished restraining the turian, “if they are set to only respond to Jack breaking out of cryo and are just running basic preservation codes then we can use remote detonated grenades against them. Most mech’s in stand-by mode won’t recognize them as a threat. Trick will be getting down there,” he pointed to the second door, “maybe that’s the way down?”

Miranda did not really look pleased with her comrade’s helpful suggestion Shepard noted with amusement as she turned toward Jacob. “Maybe,” she responded to him, “but there is a chance they might be set to activate if someone enters the room who’s not authorized.” She looked at the armored glass floor to ceiling windows separating them from the two-story tall room. “Let’s try another way first,” she said as she made her way around the console and over to the square of glass in the center. Raising her omni-tool she began a scan of the glass to get an idea of its composition and of its resonance frequency.

“What are you doing?” the dark-haired woman’s tone was angrily challenging as she came over, “we can maybe break through this glass, but that seems likely to cause the mechs to activate.”

Shepard smirked as the omni-tool returned some very favorable results. The glass was one solid three-inch thick sheet instead of more difficult layers. The tempering process that it went through to make it harder actually helped in this case as the molecular structure was, as a side effect, very regular which would actually make it easier to shatter with a resonance effect. “I’m not planning on breaking it by bluntly beating against it,” she told the other woman as she lifted her right hand and pressed it close to the top right corner of the large glass pane. Closing her eyes for a second she visualized the effect that she wanted, then using her hand as a focal point formed a barrier around her hand. One that was very orderly and rigid, so rigid that it would help hold in place the molecular structure of the glass.

“What are you doing?” Miranda repeated her question, however both challenge and anger had drained from her voice, replaced by confusion and curiosity. Instead of responding, Shepard took a step closer to the glass, bought her left hand up close to her mouth and formed the second, mass increasing, dark energy field. Then she activated her external speakers and sang. Blessedly, Miranda did not interrupt her, though the Commander could hear her muttering to herself about the difficulty of maintaining two different mass effect fields at the same time as the operative activated her omni-tool so she could monitor what the auburn-haired woman was doing.

Shepard carefully increased the effect of the field around her left hand, lowering the note in a steady decrease until finally she sensed a vibration in the glass underneath her right hand. Now that she had the proper pitch she needed more amplitude, she thought back to the dream memory recalling exactly how the musician had done it, then subtly altered the dark energy field until with a startling suddenness, and a sharp sounding noise, the glass cracked underneath her hand. She glanced down into the next room, verifying that the YMIR mechs had not reacted to what she was doing, then refocused on the glass in front of her. This was not as easy as the prothean musician had made it seem, Shepard thought as she felt the start of a headache forming. She grimaced at the starting throb in her temples, she needed to figure out how move both fields before she ended up with a biotic over-extension migraine.

‘Do or do not. There is no try,’ the immortalized words of the old Star Wars movie came to her, causing her to grin. How to do this? A thought came to her, and she relaxed her focus on the barrier field around her right hand. She took a step to the side while sliding her hand along and then refocused her concentration, recreating the needed ordered rigidity. Focus, concentrate - now she moved the field around her left hand. Another snap resounded in the room and the crack in the glass extended. Now that she had the proper pitch and amplitude that part wasn’t proving to be that difficult.
“Woa,” Jacob sounded in her helmet, “I’ve never seen anyone use their biotics like that - human,
asari or otherwise.”

“Neither have I,” Miranda responded, sounding oddly subdued, “I’ve never even heard or read of
any technique that would allow you to do this either. I don’t understand it,” she complained,
“nothing in her files suggests she sought out any advanced training beyond the Alliance standard
biotic training for Vanguards. There was not even a hint in them of her having an interest in
researching advanced biotic techniques on her own,” the dark-haired Operative added, sounding
rather miffed.

Shepard’s lips twitched once in amusement and then stilled, she needed to focus only on what she
was doing her and speed this along. Right hand relaxes, step, re-focus, left hand move - again the
crack in the glass extended another half meter further along the top of the panel. Rinse, repeat, her
focus narrowed to just the task in front of her, trusting that Miranda and Jacob together would be able
to keep watch for any further attacks. She reached the corner, shifted to go down the side, reached
another corner, shifted to go up. Shift, crack, shift, crack, she was almost there. Finally, the last shift,
by now her head was truly throbbing in a full over-extension headache. Just once more, she shifted,
focused, the glass snapped and cracked and with gasp of relief Shepard let her biotics fade away. She
went to one knee as she closed her eyes and bowed her head with an audible groan of pain, her
temples felt like a bass drum was pounding in them.

“She over extend herself?” She winced as Jacob’s overly loud voice echoed in her helmet.

“Yes,” Miranda responded him in a thankfully quieter tone as she knelt next to Shepard.
“Commander, you need to use your energy-gel, the second tube to the left in your helmet will
provide you with it.”

Amanda grunted an acknowledgment, she knew that the operative was correct some energy-gel with
its mix of sugars, proteins and stimulants would help with the over-exhaustion. She identified the
proper tube and took a few good pulls on it and grimaced at the lemon-lime, over-sweetened taste of
it. Still though she could almost feel the pounding lessen as she continued to suck the gel down
despite its almost nausea inducing sweetness. “Thanks for reminding me,” she told the dark-haired
woman, and didn’t even have to force the sincere tone as she rose to her feet. “Think you can pull it
free?” She gestured to the approximately 3 meters by 2.5-meter section of glass that she had cracked
lose.

The bluish white shimmer of a barrier field reformed around Jacob as he walked over to the windows
to looked down. “Mechs still haven’t moved,” he noted as he turned to look at the door behind them.
“We need to get moving soon. They’re probably trying to figure out how to get us out of here
without us hacking into this terminal and releasing all the prisoners, but that will only last for so
long.”

“Agreed,” Miranda responded to him, and then turned her gaze on the glass pane. “And yes
Commander, I can pull this free,” she said while extending her hand toward it. A bluish-white haze
surrounded her outstretched hand, then boiled out toward the glass and enclosed it. The woman’s fist
closed, she pulled her arm back toward her and the pane of glass groaned, shrieked, and then with a
loud crack came free. Miranda lifted it up, over the railing, and then guided it over to the side. She
left it leaning up against the railing.

Leaning out, Shepard glanced below and let out a breath of relief at the still mechs below. As she
had guessed, breaking free the glass did not match with any of the pre-programmed stimuli that
would cause them to come of out their current hibernation mode. Lucky. The parameters could have
been set to indiscriminate rather than discriminate and that would have likely resulted in them
activating. She had suspected, however, that the guards did not want three YMIR mechs alerting on just anything and unleashing their full arsenal at it due to the risk of it possibly being one of them.

Shepard pulled out three grenades and started modifying them so that they would detonate upon receiving a remote signal and so that they were magnetic. “Two grenades each, try and sticky them on the heads?”

“That should work,” Jacob nodded as he worked on his own three grenades. Another minute and they were both finished with their modifications.

“So how is your throwing aim?” Shepard asked him with a challenging grin.

“Good enough for this,” he smirked back confidently.

“Alright, let’s do this then,” Shepard said, very conscious of the time passing. Her head was still pounding, but the lights were no longer bothering her and she didn’t feel dizzy. At this point her recovery was simply due to her not using her biotics, it would take the energy gel around ten or so minutes to really affect her. Fortunately, the YMIR’s were rather large targets and they were very conveniently placed as well in a tight semi-circle almost directly below Jacob and she when they stood next to the nine-foot-wide opening in the glass paneled wall. Along with Jacob she leaned forward and gently lobbed one grenade, watching with a held breath as it clicked and held onto the rounded head of the mech on the far right. The mech didn’t move, she glanced to the side and shared a pleased smile with Jacob. Two grenades, and then they took turns, first Jacob and then her on the center one.

“Probably should step back some,” Jacob commented, “there’s a good chance the self-destructs will activate.”

“Just what I was thinking,” agreed Shepard, moving around to the other side of the console with him. Miranda was over next to the locked doors, plenty far enough away. “Light em up,” she directed Jacob. He nodded and tapped his omni-tool sending the signal, and the six grenades went off in a single explosion powerful enough to shake the floor beneath them and their armor’s VIs to dampen their external sound receivers. They didn’t move waiting for it, and a half-second later the characteristic warning sound of a YMIR’s self-destruct times three sounded. A few seconds later there were three more explosions in quick succession, shaking the floor once more and then silence. “Alright let’s get down there,” Shepard ordered, taking a reluctant look toward the opening. She really didn’t want to use her biotics until she absolutely had to until the energy-gel kicked in.

“This door should lead down to the next level,” Miranda suggested, raising her omni-tool and releasing the door’s lock. It slid open, revealing a descending ramp, a corner and what looked like another descending ramp.

Well it certainly did look like it headed down to where they wanted to go. Shepard nodded, “Lock the door behind us please,” she requested. “Might not do much good with the opening in the glass, but no reason to make it easier on them.” Once on the lower level, the helpful guard proved to be correct. They could unlock just Jack’s cryo-stasis chamber from the local console. “Do it,” she nodded to Jacob and then the three of them watched as a large machine arm unfolded, lowered, grabbed onto the cryo-chamber, turned a half turn, and then lifted it from its recessed location.

“That’s Jack?” Jacob sounded bemused and Shepard didn’t blame him as they beheld the slender woman, her body covered in intricate body art. She at least wore pants, but the only thing covering, if one could use the word, her breasts was a halter top made of thin bands. Pretty much they covered only the woman’s nipples and little else, leaving all of her upper body art on full display.
As soon as the woman’s hands twitched, Shepard waved her omni-tool over the console, sending the order for the restraints around the woman’s arms and neck to release. Jack went to one knee at the sudden release of her bonds before catching herself. Shepard stepped forward, “I assume you would like to get out of this place?” she said through the external speakers of her helmet.

Jack rubbed one hand down her face and then her dark brown eyes snapped open and focused on Shepard. She coughed once, “Who the hell are you? You’re not a guard.”

“Amanda Shepard, Alliance Commander and Council Spectre,” Shepard introduced herself as she took another step forward and offered a helping hand. “And I’d like to recruit you.”

“You sound like a pussy,” Jack sneered at her hand as she rose without any help. “And Shepard died, everyone knows that.”

Amanda smiled sourly, “I got better, Cerberus saw fit to dump a few billion dollars into getting me back on my feet.” Shepard figured to better to get this out of the way immediately and see how the woman reacted to the idea of working with Cerberus before allowing an angry, powerful biotic aboard a cramped shuttle with them.

“Cerberus!” Jack snarled, the glow of biotics surrounding her body as she summoned a barrier. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Shepard took only a second to evaluate the situation, “Alright, your call,” she agreed easily. “But can I ask what your dispute is with them?” she inquired, crossing her arms casually over her chest. She was ready to summon her own barrier, but didn’t want to escalate the situation.

Jack laughed wildly, “You don’t know?”

“No, otherwise I wouldn’t ask,” Shepard responded.

Jack barred her teeth at them, “They took me when I was a child too young to remember, experimented on me, tortured me. I’m Subject Zero, and Cerberus has been trying to recapture me for quite a while, so if you think I’m going with you anywhere near them your crazy.”

Shepard shook her head, turned toward Miranda. “Seriously, did you know about this?”

“No!” Miranda protested, “I’ve heard about Subject Zero, but had no idea that the Jack in the dossier was the same person.”

Amanda shook her head, somehow she doubted that TIM hadn’t known that Jack was also Subject Zero. “In any case, we are currently your only way off this prison ship. Let’s get out of here, and discuss the matter further on the shuttle. As I said, I’m interested in recruiting you for a mission, not in turning you over to Cerberus.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed on Shepard, staring at her through the clear face plate of her helmet. “Tell you what, let’s make a deal. I bet you have access to lots of Cerberus databases. I want access to them, see what Cerberus has on me. You want me on your team then let me go through those databases.”

Jack lifted her chin, crossed her arms over her chest and cocked one hip in an arrogant pose as she waited for a response.

“Agreed,” Shepard acquiesced immediately, “I’ll give you full access.”

“You don’t have authorization to give her access to those files,” Miranda angrily protested over their inter-team communications channel.
She ignored the Cerberus operative’s protest for now, “Now to get back to the shuttle from here.” She glanced over at Jack, fortunately they had another biotic with them now, one that probably had a bone to pick with the guards. Also, the energy-gel had finally hit and her headache was receding, she could use her biotics again without feeling like her head was about to split open. Apparently while the protheans could easily maintain multiple dark energy fields at the same time she could not, at least not for any extended period of time…or at least not without one of those implants. Shepard shook her head, now was definitely not the time to risk getting caught up in a new prothean memory. “Easiest way is probably just to retrace our steps, so up the ramp,” she directed them with a wave of her hand. Miranda and Jacob formed up on her left, while Jack hung uneasily on the other side of her. Shepard sighed, she could tell already that getting back to the shuttle was going to be interesting.
Part 1: Chapter 6::36 hrs. Post Awakening: MSV Menrva/Normandy SR-2

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The Mass Effect universe is the property of Bioware/Electronic Arts. No infringement of these copyrights is intended as this is a not for profit fan fiction work.

Rewrite Notes: Still inspired by the Beyonce song “Save the Hero,” from the album I am…Sasha Fierce.

Author’s Notes: The PTSD treatment described here is still very experimental, but the FDA has given MDMA ‘breakthrough’ status (only 200 other drugs have ever been assigned this status in the history of the FDA’s existence) which means the first clinical trials were exceptionally promising. Certainly, it’s very hopeful that there might actually be a decisive treatment for PTSD around the corner. Search for PTSD and MDMA in your browser and look for the Science Mag article from Aug 26, 2017 which gives the actual results of the first clinical trials and for the PBS.org article which gives a first-hand account of the treatment. Everything else mentioned PTSD related is my own completely unprofessional opinion based on my reading of various articles about how memories and treatments work. I may be totally wrong, but it seems like the worst thing you can do to yourself is focus on a traumatic event and ‘relive it over and over’ in your mind. I’m not saying not to deal with it, but to deal with it in the right therapeutic setting and to get in that therapeutic setting as quickly as possible. Speaking about your memories sends them through the ‘logical’ side of your brain and reduces the emotional content of them, which seems to be why talking about the traumatic memory helps. This seems to be what the MDMA trials focuses and expands on, it’s an interesting interaction, and from what those who have been through the trials are saying its extremely effective. Personally, I’m crossing my fingers for this to truly be as helpful as it seems at this stage of the clinical trials.

Revision History: 11/24/2017; 6/6/2018

“So, what’s up with all the paint?” Jack asked curiously she entered the conference room behind Shepard, “and is this the Menrva or the Normandy.” The tattooed woman inquired in a snarky tone.

“Yes,” Shepard responded dryly, “This was supposed to be the Normandy SR-2, but I didn’t think that advertising who we were outside of Citadel space was a great idea so we’re in the process of re-identifying her as the MSV Menrva.”

“Yea, no shit,” Jack snarled as she stared off angrily into space. “Not that many humans out in the Terminus systems, makes you easy to spot.”

“Bounty hunter pick you up?” She inquired, keeping her tone carefully neutral, with those tattoos Jack must have really stood out from the crowd.

“Yea,” Jack jerked her gaze toward her with a glare, she opened her mouth as if she was going to say something else…
“Welcome to the Menrva, Jack,” Miranda said as she strode into the room, “we weren’t introduced before but I am Miranda Lawson, Shepard’s second-in-command. Before we go any further I want you to understand one thing, on this ship we follow orders.” Shepard’s eyebrows rose, both at the hypocrisy of the Cerberus Operative, who had yet to take even so much as a suggestion from her without arguing over it, making such a statement, and the tone the woman was taking with their newest team member. Jack was already uncertain about being here at all, taking such a tone with her was certainly not going to keep her here instead of taking a walk at the next port.

Jack turned toward her, “Tell the Cerberus cheerleader to back the fuck off Shepard,” the tattooed convict snarled, “I’m only here because of our deal.”

“And I’m not breaking it, Miranda will let you into the system,” Shepard responded promptly, keeping her manner calm and controlled. “Let me know what you find,” a note of sincerity added to that, and she wasn’t acting, after listening to Jack she dearly wanted to know the details of how and why Cerberus had been kidnapping young biotic children and then experimenting on them in such a way that Jack would describe it as torture. It sounded like one more reason among many to take out the terrorist group if she had a decent shot at doing it. She was aware that Miranda at least seemed to think she should be grateful to Cerberus for bringing her back to live, but honestly the jury was really out on that one. Something…something told her that where she had been…had been wonderful.

“Hear that precious,” Jack taunted Miranda, dragging Shepard’s attention back to the other two women, “We’re going to be friends.” Her tone shifted to one more that was more serious and threatening, “You, me, and every embarrassing little Cerberus secret.” The two women stared at one another, each one making it obvious they didn’t like the other one bit. This was going to be a problem and a headache, Shepard knew, fighting back the urge to snap angrily at the both of them for falling into behavior that was more suited to two teenagers posturing at each other. “I’ll be reading in the hold, or somewhere in the lower decks,” Jack turned and walked toward the door. “I don’t like a lot of through traffic, so keep your people off me,” the woman added without looking back at either of them.

Shepard watched as Jack strode out of the briefing room, her walk cocky as she had gotten what she wanted from them. Access to the files Cerberus had on her. She turned to the angry woman standing across from her. Miranda was definitely upset, “You shouldn’t have given her those files,” tersely said the black-haired woman.

It was time to get her supposed second-in-command to start thinking about certain things that just didn’t add up, decided Shepard. “You do realize that the Illusive Man couldn’t have expected us to pick her up and her just agree to work with us because he paid for her to be released right?” Shepard pointed out, “Especially given her very reasonable antagonistic attitude toward Cerberus. I certainly wouldn’t just join back up with a group that had tortured me as a child without a very big juicy carrot being dangled in front of me.”

Miranda frowned at her, her gaze becoming less angry and more thoughtful. “You think he knew she would ask for the information?” She sounded doubtful.

Shepard shrugged, “I’m just saying he had to have known we would have to give her a reason to work with us, and it would have to be something she wanted badly enough.” She paused a moment for that to sink in, “He strikes me as the type of person who thinks several moves ahead, and he did give us the dossier on her.” She huffed out an annoyed breath as she realized something herself, “Which means there won’t be anything in our databases on her that he doesn’t want her to find anyway.”
“That’s…” Miranda paused frowning as she considered it. “That’s probably true,” she admitted after a moment.

Shepard had to admit Miranda’s continued presence, and her claiming of the second-in-command position on the ship confused her. The operative seemed like a competent administrator and a decent, if not inspired, leader - but only so long as everyone already acknowledged her right to lead and followed her orders perfectly. However, actual life was seldom like that, people weren’t mechs. They didn’t follow orders perfectly and they instinctively evaluated you, looking for a reason to follow you, and if they didn’t find it part of them would always mistrust and doubt your decisions. When you led people into situations that could easily get them killed, it was essential that you had the trust of that deep-down animal part of themselves. That part of them had to be certain that obeying your orders, even when their instincts were screaming at them that there was a good chance of dying if they did, was actually their best chance of survival. Your people had to be able to trust in you, and not just in your tactical ability.

That was where Miranda failed spectacularly, and she didn’t even seem to understand that she needed to instill that type of trust in the people she led. Which meant that Miranda wasn’t used to leading combat teams, or at least she hadn’t been called upon to lead them with any frequency. She had probably either operated alone, or lead research type teams exactly like the Lazarus Project. Why then was the woman serving as her second-in-command instead of being assigned to lead another research project? She seemed much better suited for that type of position than playing at being a biotic combat specialist. Jacob seemed to be a fairly competent soldier, nothing spectacular, but solid and dependable. More importantly, he had a clue about what he was doing instead of needing her to babysit him during combat, which was what she found herself doing with Miranda. On the prison ship she had needed to keep constant track of the operative. What she was doing and when, and forget expecting her to actually communicate what she was about to do with her team or team leader.

On that ship there had been Jacob and she, and then Miranda. Once Jack had joined them, there had been Jacob and she, and Miranda and Jack dangerously playing one-upmanship with one another. They were going to get her killed if she didn’t do something about the situation. However, there was a much larger question looming over all of this, supposedly she was supposed to be going up against the Collectors to stop them from taking any more human colonists. This was definitely a mission that warranted a team of well-trained elite level special forces types. The equivalent of an entire platoon’s worth of N-type operatives. What did she get from Cerberus after they spent 4 billion on bringing her back to life? One ex-Corsair marine of average ability; one strong biotic with some combat training, but no training in how to operate as a team member; and now one ex-convict very strong biotic with absolutely no military training and no interest on being on the same team as the other two at all. It was…mind boggling honestly, thought Shepard.

“So,” Shepard glanced up at Miranda questioningly, “You said we would talk about your undocumented biotic abilities once we were back on the station.” The dark-haired woman looked pointedly around them.

“Actually, you said that,” commented Shepard, then smirked at the other woman’s frown, “but yes, lets discuss my biotic abilities. How about we start with how are my biotics are so much stronger now and then we can move on from there?”

The other woman stared at her for a moment with narrowed eyes, then finally nodded, “Alright, you already know about your L5n implant. It gives you about a 20% increase in power over your old L3 implant and should match the L4 series in terms of safety and lack of side effects. It contains an on-board VI interface for external monitoring and fine tuning to your specific physiology.” She tilted
her head slightly to the side in thought, “In fact we should probably go see Dr. Chakwas about pulling the information from it, and I’ll see if there are any modifications I can make to the VI to optimize it and reduce the chances of you getting another over-exhaustion headache.”

“Fine,” Shepard grunted, “I’ve got some questions for her too, so we might as well discuss everything in one go instead of repeating it multiple times.” She didn’t let Miranda argue with her, but decided to borrow a page from Jack and just leave for where she wanted to go without permitting any further discussion.

Since the conference room was on the second deck and the medical bay on the third, Shepard first made her way to the elevator. As Miranda joined her, she ignored the frowning dark-haired woman standing opposite her as it descended to the next deck in favor of figuring out what exactly she wanted to say to Dr. Chakwas. She was hardly going to mention that she was recalling entire prothean memories…or that they were so vivid that she forgot who she was entirely while recalling them. She had to assume that everything that went on in the ship was being monitored and that included the medical bay and the doctor’s medical records. She highly doubted Cerberus or TIM had any respect for privacy rights.

“Dr. Chakwas?” the older woman seemed to be completely engrossed in whatever she was reading as Shepard and Miranda entered the Medical bay.

The grey-haired woman swiveled around in her chair to face them, “Commander, Operative Lawson, is there something I can do for you two?”

“Could you pull the data from my implant, Doctor,” Shepard requested politely, “Miranda wants to take a look at it and see if there are any optimizations that can be done.”

“So that you can possibly maintain two distinct mass effect fields, one of which, though it was a barrier, was not a personal barrier, for a longer period time without stressing your implant and nervous system and going into biotic over-exhaustion,” Miranda added with a snap to her voice.

Dr. Chakwas’ green eyes narrowed, “Not a personal barrier?”

“Indeed,” Miranda stalked closer, “And she was going to explain how she went from knowing how to execute the basic set of biotics attacks taught to every vanguard by the Alliance to knowing how to execute such advanced biotic techniques such as a true biotic charge, a biotic flash-step, a four meter across biotic sphere, and the previously mentioned dual mass effect fields.”

Shepard rolled her eyes, “It wasn’t that hard, even before this new implant I could maintain a barrier and throw around some attacks at the same time. Most biotics with any amount of training can unless they have very little biotic ability. Granted this was a directed barrier, but it was still a barrier field. And as for the other biotic abilities you already know that I’ve come into contact with more than one prothean beacon.” She skillfully dismissed the biotics techniques she had performed with a combination of misdirection and outright lying. Dr. Chakwas knew about what had happened on Feros, but the Council had classified the existence of the Cipher itself as well as how she had attained it. With any luck Cerberus did not know about it, and if they didn’t she planned on keeping it that way.

That seemed to surprise Miranda, “You got these from the beacon on Virmire? I thought that just contained a more complete record of the Ilos message?”

Now to finish selling her misleading concoction. “Actually,” she leaned against the cabinet behind
her, “both of them contained more than just the message. That was just the last thing transmitted to both of them. It’s just taken me awhile to un-jumble everything, and still I only have confusing bits and pieces of imagery floating around in my head. Sometimes I dream of short sequences of messages. Those at least are easier for me to understand.”

“So, you learned these biotic techniques from the previous beacon messages?” Dr. Chakwas inquired.

Shepard mentally blessed her for helping the deception along, “Before I didn’t have the biotic power or the fine control to perform them. I suspect the new implant is responsible for my increased ability to finely control my biotics, but even a 20% increase over my L3 implant can’t account for the level of power or reserve I’m experiencing now.” She directed the last comment pointedly toward Miranda.

The Cerberus operative narrowed her eyes at the shift in subject, but did deign to answer her. “We exposed your eezo nodules to element zero, to increase their density.”

Shepard frowned at the answer as from what she knew it didn’t seem very likely. “I thought element zero exposure only caused the development of eezo nodules in fetus’s or even more rarely young people with underdeveloped eezo nodules during puberty.”

Miranda hesitated a moment before admitting, “Normally that would be true, but we used an experimental process to temporarily force yours into a receptive state similar to the condition underdeveloped nodules are in during puberty.”

“So, this process could be used on anyone to increase the density of their mass effect nodules?” Shepard questioned as her thoughts churned in unpleasant directions. Was this part of what Cerberus had been working on in their experiments with Jack and the other biotic children?

“Perhaps with more research work, it might, but for now the process is too random and unstable.” Miranda’s blue eyes met hers, “Quite frankly it would have killed a living person, but you were frozen at the time. We were able to temporarily insulate your eezo nodules from your neural tissues and drain the mass effect field fluctuations that occurred due to the additional exposure so that they didn’t send you into convulsions and burn out your neural pathways.”

Shepard remembered the report about her body being exposed to vacuum and subzero temperatures. “I was a Spectrecicle?” she couldn’t help it, she started chuckling. It just struck her as funny, and it was a better option than getting upset over the way she had died.

Both Chakwas and Miranda stared at her, with slightly shocked expressions. Miranda recovered first, a smirk curving her lips, “Yes you were, if you hadn’t been we wouldn’t have even attempted it.”

Shepard was a bit surprised that it was Miranda out of the two woman who first understood her black humor. She quirked a smile at the black-haired woman, “So you made my eezo nodules larger and that along with the new L5n amplifier increased my biotic abilities.”

“Correct, and the procedure worked much better than we had hoped, your eezo nodules more than doubled in size. Eezo nodule size is only a rough measurement of biotic ability of course, but judging from the data we have on asari your abilities should be on par with the median to upper range of their species. I’m very curious to see how you progress as is the Illusive Man.”
Miranda’s tone sounded odd. Shepard eyed her more closely, she had sounded jealous? Perhaps because she now seemed to be a more powerful biotic? That seemed petty of the dark-haired woman, but possible. “It certainly seems to have,” Shepard confirmed, thinking back to what she had been able to do on the prison ship compared to what she recalled of her biotic abilities before her death. “So,” she continued after a long moment during which everyone was apparently lost in their thoughts, “I think that has both of our questions answered, how my biotics got so strong and how I learned those techniques…and maybe more in the future. No telling what else is hiding around in those memories.”

“Yes,” Miranda looked a bit bemused by that possibility, “well, thank you. You’ve certainly given me a lot to think about.” She turned as if to leave, then hesitated almost broadcasting a sense of uncertainty. Finally the dark-haired woman asked, “Would you be willing to teach Jacob and I that prothean barrier method? It seemed very strong and yet as if it didn’t take much of your reserve to maintain.”

Perhaps she should have expected such a request, yet honestly enough other things had been going on in her mind that it really hadn’t been on her radar. Yet, perhaps this was just the opportunity she needed… “Certainly, she responded, I’ll see if Jack wants to join us,” she ignored the grimace that flitted across Miranda’s face. “The sooner we can start operating together as a cohesive team the greater the chance of us actually managing to stop the Collectors.”

The Cerberus Operative looked as if she had bitten into something sour for just a moment before her expression smoothed over, “Of course Commander, the better we are at coordinating with one another the greater our chances of success.”

Shepard quirked a terse smile, “Yes, the trip back to the shuttle was interesting. Its fortunate that the guards seemed just as uncoordinated in their attacks.”

Miranda had the grace to flush in embarrassment, between the two of them they had almost caught Shepard in a point blank biotic explosion. Fortunately, she had seen what was about to happen and flash-stepped out of the way.

“Let me think about how to teach it,” Shepard continued, “and then I’ll arrange a training time with everyone.”

The dark-haired woman nodded, “Thank you Commander,” she responded and then left the medical bay.

Shepard watched the closed doors for a few seconds before returning her attention to the other woman in the room. She went over to the chair arranged on the other side of the Doctor’s desk and slumped down into it. “Probably not a surprise,” she commented, “but I’m having flashbacks to my death. I’d like to get that treated before it becomes more troublesome than me just having issues with controlling my breathing while wearing a helmet.”

“That’s…,” the grey-haired woman inclined her head, “not surprising.” She met Shepard’s silver eye gaze, “I gather you don’t want to talk to Ms. Chambers?”

Amanda snorted, “Ms. Cerberus is just misunderstood? No, I don’t think so. I know you’re certified and did it on the Normandy. Do you have the drug you need, or do I need to figure out how to get some?”

Chakwas raised one eyebrow, “We do have a small stock on-board, but I’d rather give standard therapy methods a chance of working before using it.” She leveled a serious look Shepard’s
direction, “Unless you’re concerned about slipping into a panic attack?”

Amanda gave the question the seriousness it warranted, was she in danger of going into a panic attack? Slowly she shook her head, “I don’t think so,” she said with a frown, “it's just that its…a very overwhelming memory.”

The Doctor held up one hand, indicating that she should wait then activated her terminal and typed in a few commands. Shepard looked over in curiosity as a privacy barrier began lowering over the windows to the galley and then she noticed that the door control panel was lit red, indicating that they were now locked. “There,” Chakwas said with a note of satisfaction, “Now let’s continue, overwhelming how?”

Amanda frowned pondering the question, “Actually,” she hesitated for a moment and then with an annoyed shake of her head finally continued, “actually its all of my memories that seem a bit overwhelming.” She grimaced, “It’s like I’m there…again. I can recall exactly how I felt, how things sounded, how they smelled. Its,” she let out a huff of breath, “eerie actually. Memories aren’t supposed to be like this,” she met Karin’s concerned green eyed gaze for a moment and then glanced away before continuing. “And it’s not just the memory of how I died, or the memories since then. It’s… old memories as well, things I thought I had forgotten.” She reached up, rubbed her forehead, “I can remember my sixth birthday party, who was there, what gifts I got and who gave them to me. My mother made me a German chocolate cake with cream cheese icing, my favorite kind. There’s pieces missing from my memories of it, I can tell because things jump around and some memories are just sensory snippets like how the cake tasted, and how warm it was that day, how the insects sounded in the distance and the sound of the other people in the colony talking and working, but the bits I remember don’t seem any different than any of my memories of what happened earlier today.”

“And even those are wrong,” Shepard continued, her voice low, troubled, “I shouldn’t remember so well how the air smelt on that station. Exactly how our footsteps sounded on the metal grating, the sound of yelling in the distance.” She closed her eyes, “All I have to do is think about it and it’s like I was actually back there right now everything is so real.” She knew her tone betrayed how bothered she was by this alteration, but seriously your memories weren’t supposed to just drastically change on you.

Across from her Chakwas leaned back in her chair with a deep frown, “Your memories sound almost drell like,” she observed thoughtfully.

“Drell…” Shepard dredged up what information she remembered on the reptilian humanoids whose world had failed due to over industrialization. Those that remained had been saved by the hanar and now lived on Kajhe, the hanar home world. Some of them were trained from a very young age to be assassins, she recalled from her N level training and were reputed to be some of the galaxies best. “I’ve never actually met one.”

“There aren’t many of them; it’s not surprising we’ve never run into one.” Chakwas stared at her thoughtfully for a moment before speaking again, “And that definitely means that I don’t want to use MDMA on you without understanding what's going with your memories. MDMA both keeps you from being overwhelmed by your emotions, and at the same time helps prevent you from being numbed to them. That’s what makes it such a therapeutic aid for treating post traumatic stress disorder. But with what you’ve described to me, and without understanding what is happening and why, I don’t dare give you any psychotropic drugs. There’s no telling what odd interactions might happen, or what you might experience. It might even make your symptoms worse.”

Amanda grimaced, she had really hoped for the relatively quick fix. She understood where Chakwas was coming from however, and truth be told, she was a bit concerned about the possibilities the
Doctor brought up as well. “Alright, slow but safe way it is,” she agreed.

“Good,” the Doctor responded, “Now, I have a question for you, it’s perfectly understandable that your death should result in some psychological issues, but to what extent do you think your memory changes are exacerbating the effects?”

Shepard leaned back in the chair and considered the question, one of the things you learned during N training was that you were more likely than other military members to be placed in situations that were psychologically difficult. You were trained on methods to deal with such situations, first as much as possible don’t dwell on anything until you had a chance to get proper medical and psychological attention, memories were odd, you could literally make them worse over time due to the way that memories were stored within your mind. Each time you referenced a memory you re-wrote it, if you reference it and focused on how traumatizing it was then you could make it more traumatizing. If you referenced it, and then passed it through the ‘logical’ side of the brain by speaking about it with a therapist then you could overwrite it with a version that was less traumatizing. Thus, in N training you were taught to not overly dwell on anything troubling in a mission until you were back from it and had a chance to speak about whatever it was with your assigned councilor. The Systems Alliance had taken the lessons of the past to heart, and a soldier’s psychological health was treated exactly like their physical. Soldiers got hurt, physically and psychologically, you were expected to make sure both were treated and healed before you went out on another mission. “Yes, definitely they are, it would be easier for me to deal with them if they weren’t so…” she hesitated, searching for the correct words, “intense and…well ‘fresh’ in my mind so to speak.” She frowned and growled in annoyance, “Usually things properly fade some, become easier to deal with, but these aren’t.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Chakwas frowned in thought, “then I’d like to run a full neural scan on you,” she indicated one of the medical beds “and I believe we need to consult Ms. Lawson to see if she knows why your memories have been altered. The only possibility I can think of is it’s a side effect of a process they used during their reconstruction of your body. After that I’d like to schedule regular psychological therapeutic session with you, make sure you don’t become traumatized by your memories. After we learn exactly what Cerberus did and whether or not there are likely to be any complications, we can come back to the possibility of using MDMA to treat your psychological symptoms.”

Shepard allowed herself one resigned sigh before she sat down on the medical bed that Chakwas had indicated and then laid down on it while the Doctor set up for her scans. She didn’t like the idea of giving Cerberus any more information than they already had on her. Not one bit, but she couldn’t ignore this issue and just hope it went away on its own without becoming worse.

One hour later:

Miranda frowned, tapped her lower lip for a moment with one finger, looking introspective. The Cerberus operative raised her head, “An unexpected side effect from our efforts to preserve your memories,” Miranda commented her frown deepening, “though perhaps we should have anticipated it.”

“Ms. Lawson?” Chakwas inquired, she was standing beside her desk, the monitor on it showing the results of Shepard’s neural scans. The Doctor and Miranda had just been going over them while Shepard watched and hid how much she disliked having to pull in the Cerberus operative into this, but they needed answers.

“We knew it would take a significant amount of time to repair all the damage to Shepard’s body,” Miranda responded to Chakwas’s question, then she turned to address Shepard directly, “We were
concerned about your memories degrading past any hope of recovery before we were done. Wilson suggested we use a cocktail of drell neurochemicals and flood your neural tissue with them to keep your memories stable for as long as needed. Drell have perfect long-term memories, they don’t degrade over time or become less accessible like human memories. And of course it worked, you remember who you are and you remember your past. The fact that your memories seem to have improved however, and still seem to be affected…that is surprising.”

“Not really,” Chakwas spoke up, gaining their attention, “the drell neurochemicals may have permanently changed the long-term potentiation or LTP of the synaptic connections that control memory in the commander’s brain and altered the functioning of the transfer of memories between short term and long-term memory through the hippocampus. Drell brain structure allows for perfect recall due to three main reasons, they have improved tetanic stimulation of a single pathway to a synapse; they have improved synaptic cooperation in accessing their memories; and they have better LTP synaptic pathway persistence.”

Seeing Shepard’s confused expression, Dr. Chakwas tried a slightly different explanation, “In the human brain often only one memory pathway will be activated and that may be too weak a response to actually access the memory, but if several associated pathways are activated for the same memory then there is a greater chance of success. Commander it’s impossible for your memories to have actually changed, but what might have improved is your ability to activate the synaptic pathways to them. Or to put it in another way, you may be accessing them in a more drell-like manner allowing you to recall memories that were always there, but you were simply not able to access before.”

Alright, neuroscience was not her field, but Amanda thought she understood what Chakwas was telling her. “So my memories will always be this way, be drell-like, from now on?” Shepard questioned uncertainly. She didn’t know how she felt about that, would her memories always be so intense and overwhelming?

“I’m not certain” Miranda didn’t look pleased at having to give that answer, probably because she didn’t know the answer. Shepard suspected that Ms. Lawson did not like to appear in any way as less than perfect. “Unfortunately, Wilson was the one who came up with the idea and had the best understanding of it. I’ll send out a message, ask the other scientists who worked with the Lazarus Project for answers.”
Part 1: Chapter 7::3 days Post Awakening: Citadel

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The Mass Effect universe is the property of Bioware/Electronic Arts. No infringement of these copyrights is intended as this is a not for profit fan fiction work.

Rewrite Notes: Still inspired by the Beyonce song “Save the Hero,” from the album I am…Sasha Fierce.

Author’s Notes: Sex warning, though it all fits within the M rating so no need to go look over on AO3. A look at our two Spectre’s in similar, but oh so very different circumstances.

Revision History: 11/26/2017

3 days Post Awakening: Citadel

Tela finished undressing, stored the last of her clothing and belongings in the secure locker provided for her and closed the locker door. Pressing her hand against the control panel in the center of the locker engaged its locking mechanism and set it so that only she could open it later. She had the next two days off, and would be spending one of them here. If the Goddess smiled on her, and no emergency calls came in, she would not require anything in it for the next twenty hours. She had even dropped some hints about what she was doing in her planned time off to Arana Vare, Councilor Tevos’ personal secretary, in the hope that if something did happen the Matriarch might actually wait, or contact one of the other Senior asari Spectres. She was, after all, not the only one currently in residence at the Citadel. Turning away from the locker, Tela grabbed the nearby cream-colored dressing gown hanging on a hook and wrapped it silky material around her body. Belting it closed, she made her way out of the dressing room and into the welcoming warmth of the one beyond.

The room was longer than wide, the far side from where she entered was nearly filled with a pearl blue lounging bath while this side had cabinets alongside the three walls. Two trays were arranged on the beige countertops, one with cups and three pitchers and the other filled with colorful fruit slices and tempting bite sized pastries. Two of the Consort’s attendants awaited her, and they both gave her slight bows as she entered. “Saala, Matron Tela,” they greeted her, deferentially holding their bows.

She bowed in return, “Saala, maidens.” The two straightened as she did, the nais on the left, a sky-blue maiden with green eyes, introducing them both, “I am Anyla, Matron, and this is Cerna.” The maiden indicated the lounging bath, “If you will give me your robe we will begin with your bath, crest treatment, manicure and pedicure.” Tela’s lips curved in amusement as she removed the robe she had just put on seconds before, she probably should have just walked in here with it over her arm. Handing it to the sky-blue maiden she crossed over to the deep tub, dipped a toe in and then with a sigh of pleasure at the perfect temperature immersed the rest of herself and then leaned back against the gently sloping backrest. The two maidens moved around her quietly, one lowering the lighting in the room while the other pulled up a stool and began gently working a moisturizer into the fronds of her crest with a massaging motion of her fingertips.
Cerna, who had lowered the light came back and quietly asked, “May I have one of your hands Matron?” Tela lifted her right arm from the water and placed it on the edge of the tub so that the maiden could start working on her nails. The maiden poured a small amount of moisturizer into the palm of her hand, spread it evenly between the other with a circular motion and then began massaging it into the skin of Tela’s hand and fingers. Tela let out a quiet sigh and allowed herself to relax into the two maiden’s attentions. She was here to enjoy herself and by the Goddess she was going to do exactly that.

Somewhere else within the Consort’s compound her companion for the next eighteen or so hours was being similarly prepared for their time together. Since the maiden wasn’t an asari they weren’t going though exactly the same process, but it was similar enough in that they would both be looking their best for one another when they did meet. She was certainly looking forward to meeting her chosen consort, especially since she had specified she wanted an akertira companion. Akero, akertira, one who leads and one who trusts and follows, in this specific context however it meant one who trusts and submits in a meld and lets the other partner control the experience. With aliens, since they couldn’t control the meld anyway, all of them were technically akertira within the meld…at least as related to who was controlling the meld, trust was of course a different issue. An akertira consort though, was one who would willing submit within the meld, Tela drew in an anticipatory breath at the thought, and that was so very pleasurable to experience. A submissive mind bending so sweetly and willingly to her mental touch, the matron let out her breath, patience, the wait would only make the moment more intense when it arrived.

Approximately an hour and a half later, Tela paused in the doorway her dark eyed gaze focused upon the naked maiden in the middle of the room kneeling upon a cushioned mat with her head submissively bowed. Long caramel brown hair curled halfway down a pale bare back, richly gleaming underneath the lights in a way that silently advertised that the length of it would feel like silk in her hands. Anticipation curled in her stomach as Tela padded quietly into the room, and a slight hitch of breath from the maiden indicated that the human had heard the matron though she did not otherwise move. Tela stopped beside the maiden, reached out and ran one hand through the maiden’s thick hair, just as she had suspected it felt like silk slipping through her fingers. “Jenna,” she said, speaking the name she had been given for this consort, she doubted it was the humans real name, but didn’t particularly care, the Consort vetted her employees, even the temporary ones, very thoroughly.

“Mistress,” the human quietly replied, the expected response and one that indicated the human was still in agreement with this ‘scene’ as the humans called it. Prearranged, with agreed upon limits and safe words, but it was up to Tela to establish the trust between them that would allow the human to truly submit to her. The matron ran her fingers through the maiden’s hair again then smoothed both hands over the silky length of it as she stepped around behind the female. Humans were such a contradictory species thought Tela, staring down at the maiden. They were a species that when subjected to actual slavery fought against it so viciously and underhandedly that the Batarians finally had to resort to chemically making them permanently docile to get them to actually submit, but were quite willing to play at being pleasure slaves on their own terms.

Tela shook her head at her own thoughts and then refocused upon the kneeling maiden, she sunk down in a straddling kneel behind the human. She was as naked as the human, having left her robe behind in the room just beyond this one. Now to put the maiden in the proper frame of mind, she wrapped her more muscular arms around the human female’s shoulders and pulled her back against her chest. Tilting her head down she said into the maiden’s shell-like ear, “You are a human, I am an asari, you are going to know that you are completely helpless, physically and mentally.” The human maiden was still and stiffening with her grasp, but yet Tela continued, “I will subdue your body with my biotics, and when we meld you will know that I have centuries of experience to draw on
compared to your decades and that you cannot possibly stop me from going wherever I want within your mind.” Now the human’s body was definitely stiff and Tela could hear her breathing rate pick up, in the air she smelt the sour odor of the human’s rising fear. “But though you are helpless against me, I will abide by the limits we agreed upon, and you will be entirely safe with me.” The maiden’s head jerked around, and wary hazel colored eyes, green with light brown specks, stared wide-eyed into her own. “You will know that as well within the meld,” Tela continued calmly, “and I will give you no reason to doubt it.”

Jenna stared at her for a moment longer, her appealingly colored greenish-brown eyes searching Tela’s own brown ones before finally asking, “Why?”

Tela smiled, pleased with the maiden’s composure, “Because everything that I said is true. You will feel helpless when I restrain you with my biotics and when we meld. It’s better for you to know it now before we begin, rather than losing yourself to panic during the meld.” Very true, a human’s unusual nervous system made melding with them while they were panicking or terrorized a very unpleasant process.

The maiden frowned at her, “I do know that, the Consort and some of her acolytes have melded with me to get me used to the sensation of it.”

Tela smirked at the human’s unwittingly innocent answer. “The Consort is a gentle mistress,” the matron responded, her tone a dangerous sounding purr, “but that’s not me. There will be no doubt when I meld with you about who’s going to be in complete control of your body and mind until I chose to release you.” She stared directly into the maiden’s beautiful eyes, her arms tight and unyielding around the human’s taunt form. There was still the scent of fear in the air, but now it had been joined by the tell-tale sent of arousal. She made a point of drawing in her breath, “Hmm, you know that I can smell that you like something about that idea, don’t you?” The maiden’s pale cheeks stained with a flush of reddish color at her blunt words, and Tela’s smile widened for the scent of the human’s arousal was only growing stronger with the maiden’s embarrassment.

“Something about that idea that you like?” Tela continued to tease the maiden, whose flush was rapidly spreading from her cheeks to the rest of her face and even slightly down her neck. “Hmm,” she pretended to ponder the idea, “Would it be the idea of being physically restrained? You did mention that was something you wanted to explore.” The matron’s gaze shifted to examine the rest of the room where several varied pieces of furniture specifically designed for sharing pleasure were spread about for her usage. Literally there were several choices, for just about all of them included built in restraint options. Jenna’s gaze followed her own and Tela gave the maiden just long enough to realize where her thoughts were going before concentrating and enveloping the maiden’s body with her biotics.

This too had been agreed upon, but the matron knew perfectly well that the idea of something and the reality of it often rather drastically parted ways as was indicated by the struggling body of the maiden. With a moments concentration she rotated the human’s flailing body so that the maiden could see her and then stepped in close enough to grab both of the human’s hands. “Easy,” she said soothingly as their gazes met, hers composed the humans wide-eyed and a bit desperate, “you’re not being hurt.” The maidens breathing was rapid, but just seeing Tela and having her hands to grip back and steady herself seemed to have eased the human’s panic. “This is what I meant by being physically helpless, I don’t need ropes or handcuffs to immobilize you just my biotics.” She altered the dark energy field surrounding the human, making it more immobilizing, “It’s one thing to intellectualize how that might feel, and another to actually know how it feels.”

The maiden couldn’t move, Tela could see the human try and fail by the ineffectual flexing of her
muscles underneath her skin. As appealing as it was to watch however, the human’s returning panic was not at all appealing. Tela tightened her grip on the maiden’s hands, reminding the human of her presence. Hazel eyes snapped up, focused on her, the human’s breathing steadied as her gaze searched for something in the asari’s and apparently found it. “Mistress,” the single word was both a plea and an indication that the maiden was still willing.

Tela moved forward, a flick of her hand dragging the maiden’s body with her, now oriented so that the human floated upon her back. A few more strides brought them over to the nearest pleasure couch, a simple one with supports in all the right places for face-to-face pleasuring. It was meant for two asari, but worked just as well for a human female and an asari. Another wave of her hand pressed the maidens body down into the cushioned surface and held her in place as Tela arranged the human’s body to her liking. The upper portion of the human’s torso flat while her hips tilted upward along the arch of the couch designed exactly for that while carefully molded cushions supported the human’s legs. Tela paused to take in the sight of the helpless maiden, the couch arranged her so that her glistening rosiness was on full display with her legs spread wide to either side. All the hair except for a small curly patch up top had been removed from the area leaving everything else smooth and bare as Tela’s own.

“Beautiful,” she sighed, making sure she was loud enough for Jenna to hear her. A bit of embarrassment was fine, but the matron did not want it to slip over into shame. And humans, especially female humans, seemed to easily fall prey to that negative emotion. A bit of equality should easily remedy that however, thought Tela as she moved up to the head of the couch. She met the maiden’s gaze for a brief second before simply straddling both the narrow couch and the human on it. Gazing down her body she met the startled hazel eyes of the maiden, “Look at how aroused, how swollen I’ve become at the thought of sharing pleasure with you.”

Hazel eyes were staring, Tela smirked as the maiden’s gaze returned to hers after a few seconds and the human’s blush intensified. The matron reached down and ran two fingers along the swollen thickness of her kunaja, exhaling a sigh of pleasure at her own touch. She was not as fully aroused as she could be she could tell, but definitely aroused. “Hmm, I’m probably just starting to purple.” She paused for a mischievous second and then in a tone that demanded a response asked, “Well, am I? Purpling that is,” she looked down inquiringly.

Wide hazel eyes stared up at her, as if to ask if she were serious about the question and she stared back in silent expectation. Finally, Jenna’s gaze lowered, “Yes, Mistress you are,” the maiden responded after a moments examination.

Satisfied, Tela swung her leg back over the couch to stand beside it, and then as if by an afterthought, reached down and stroked her damp fingers on either side of the maiden’s nose. “Since, I can smell you so well, I thought it would only be fair for you to be able to smell me,” she said in explanation as the maiden’s shocked gaze rose to meet her own. It also had the side effect of exposing the human to a full dose of her pheromones, but that Tela left unspoken. Either Jenna had wisely done her research before ever stepping a foot inside the Consort’s compound and knew or the maiden hadn’t, but the information that asari could consciously control their pheromones certainly wasn’t a secret.

“So,” with a motion of her hand Tela very carefully pulled the maiden’s arms above her head to where two conveniently placed cuffs were located. She moved up to them and began securing the human’s wrists, pausing a moment to brush her fingers over the bluish veins that served as a reminder of how delicate and thin human skin was compared to her own. “Now that you’ve had a chance to become accustomed to being held physically helpless by my biotics,” the maiden’s wrists secured, Tela moved down to the foot of the couch and likewise secured the human’s legs and ankles.
to the couch. Pausing to take another look at her helpless consort Tela was pleased to note that, judging from the amount of wetness present, the maiden was now highly aroused. She lifted her gaze upward, slowing to take in the pebbled rosy tips of the maiden’s small breasts before finally meeting Jenna’s hazel-eyed gaze. She placed one knee on the surface of the couch and began crawling up the maiden’s body, “Let’s move on to the mental helplessness, shall we?” Tela hovered over the maiden waiting for her response, she knew her eyes were going black, but would not initiate the meld until Jenna consented to it.

The maiden exhaled a whimpering sound as she briefly closed her eyes, but then she opened them again and met Tela’s gaze as she said, “Please Mistress.”

This was definitely not Tela’s first time melding with a human, and she had learned from every past experience. Humans were superficially like krogan when it came to melding in that their nervous systems carried both physical sensation and mental sensation mixed together. It made for an exquisitely pleasurable experience when they were both physically and mentally aroused, but could be overwhelming as well if you were not expecting it. Tela was expecting an intense experience, the maiden was aroused but still afraid, she could tell that from the varied scents on the air. As she lowered herself until she could feel the humans bare warm skin against her own the matron carefully reached out and aligned her aura with the human’s. Then as she reached out mentally she pushed out warm reassurance as well as her own arousal and desire for the maiden as she sought out the human’s mental landscape.

She looked around at their shared mental construct, talking in the whipping colors around them and the kneeling human in front of her. Unlike the Consort, she was not one to hide herself, “You feel it don’t you, your helplessness, that your mind is mine if I should choose to take it.” A ripple of pure fear despite the reassurance she was flooding the human’s mind with, “Yet I will not,” she pulled herself back in, let the human have a moment of respite from her mental dominance. “You are safe,” Tela swore to the human maiden, “I will do nothing to harm you, this I swear.” She wouldn’t either, not even if she found something in the human’s mind that made the maiden a threat. She might turn it over to another Spectre, but she would not harm the human herself - that thought though she kept within the privacy of her own mind.

Stillness grew with the human’s mind, there was a betraying shimmer, and then, in a dizzying swoop of outpouring sensation, the maiden’s mind accepted, trusted, yielded, and submitted. Tela shivered at the sensations flooding her from the human, the sweet complexity and intensity of emotion and physical sensation all mixed in together. “Mistress,” she heard from Jenna, both verbally and mentally and rejoiced at the submissive obedience carried within it. Her sweet akertira, Tela let her inner akero loose, causing Jenna to whine and shiver at the overwhelming sensation of dominance that rolled commandingly through her mind. There was no resistance to it though, only an increased sense of yielding submission from the human female. Tela’s arousal level went from simmer to boil in an instant and with a low growl she snapped her hips forward, burying her now throbbing kunaja into the maiden’s soft, warm flesh. She held still for a few seconds relishing the maidens higher body temperature, before beginning to rock her hips in a slow steady motion that pressed her kunaja against the maiden’s arousal slickened tenderness from tip to root and then back again.

3 days Post Awakening: MSV Menrva

Warm, sky blue skin underneath her fingertips and lips, Amanda’s fingers gently stroked along the stiff ridges of flesh that protected the more delicate ridged sensory membranes between them, while her lips brushed over the intricate tracery of sky blue flesh at the back of the asari’s neck. The two sensations together drew an aroused moan from Liara, fluttering the flesh beneath Amanda’s lips.
Only those humans who had both joined with asari and bothered to pay attention, knew how sensitive the folded skin of their scalps, the back of their necks, and the ridges along the lower sides of their heads were when they were aroused. Amanda knew, she had been with two asari before Liara, though the young archaeologist was the first asari with which she had fully bonded.

Amanda had begun by gently stroking her fingers and brushing her lips over the folds of skin that formed Liara’s scalp crest, something that they had discovered the asari greatly enjoyed. Then she had moved onto the more delicate folds of flesh at the base of Liara’s skull as the asari bowed her head, giving her better access to the sensitive flesh. She had been stroking the asari’s head for several minutes now, and from the way her lover was breathing and pressing back against her, Amanda knew Liara was very aroused by her gentle touches.

She brushed her lips further down Liara’s neck, and then over across her shoulder as she moved from where she had been kneeling behind the asari. Forsaking the smooth blue skin of her lover’s shoulder, Amanda raised her head and moved to capture bluish-purple lips merely inches away. Soft lips met, pressed against one another, parted, tongues invaded, stroked against one another. She felt Liara shiver in reaction as the asari’s hands gripped her shoulders and pulled her closer. There was the brief brush of her lover’s mind against her own, the momentary sharing of mutual pleasure and desire.

Spurred by it, Amanda tore herself away from the asari’s soft, lush, mouth, letting her lips trail down the warm skin of her lover’s throat and lower. She paused to trace her lips over the delicate line of collarbone, inhaling, drawing in Liara’s distinctive scent. It was almost like a drug for her, the smell of her lover filling her senses, arousing her further. Intellectually she knew that it was Liara’s pheromones specifically tailored to her that caused such an intense reaction, but she didn’t really care. She breathed out a soft moan against Liara’s skin and the hands gripping her shoulders clenched, nails digging briefly into her bare flesh before relaxing once again. Pulling away for a moment, she requested softly, “Lie down.”

She watched as Liara lay down on her bed, the asari’s blue eyes, their pupils dilated in arousal, never leaving her own gaze. She placed her hands on either side of her lover and leaned over her, “You are so beautiful.”

Liara’s hands came up to cup her face, “As are you, Amanda.”

She turned her head and kissed the palm of one sky blue hand, then lowered herself to lie down beside the asari. She pressed her lips once again against the skin over Liara’s collarbone and started a leisurely path downward, letting her lips and tongue taste and trace their way across the silky-smooth sky-blue skin. Liara’s arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer to the asari’s warm body, bare skin pressed against bare skin. Her lips traveled up the soft swell of a breast and finally surmounted the crest, her lips closed around the tip and her tongue swirled around it savoring both texture and taste and the way it hardened even more underneath her attentions. Though the greatest pleasure for an asari came from the melding, the joining of nervous systems with their partner, that didn’t mean they didn’t enjoy physical contact or were unable to be physically aroused, as Liara’s current reaction perfectly showed.

Liara moaned and twitched in pleasure at Amanda’s touch, her back arching to press her breast against her lover’s mouth, and the asari’s arms tightened around the human woman above her.

“Oh,” Liara whispered, drawing one leg up in a slow caress along the outside of Amanda’s thigh, begging for her lover’s intimate touch, but the human was intent on taking her time. She wanted to stretch out this precious moment they had managed to steal for themselves for as long as possible.
Even though passion burned hot between them at the slightest glance, they did their best be entirely professional with each other when they were around the rest of the crew. Unfortunately, on the Normandy, that ended up being more of the time than either wished. The Captain’s quarter’s placement, right beside the ship’s dining area, made it hard for them to find a private moment together without someone noticing. Shepard tried not to resent their placement because she was the only person onboard who even had quarters. If she had been any lower rank, she would have to share the sleeper pods along with everyone else and there would be no opportunity at all for her and Liara to steal a few hours together.

Shepard was aware that most of the crew knew, or at least strongly suspected, they were lovers. That might have caused problems earlier, but between the events on Noveria where Liara had fought with Shepard against her own mother, and then the fact that the asari had been by her side for the final battle had put to rest any lingering doubts about where the maiden asari’s allegiance lay, and did a lot to disprove views like Gunnery Chief Williams that their non-human allies wouldn’t stick with them when the going got tough.

With their actions in the Citadel Battle, Liara and Tali had more than proven themselves in the eyes of the Alliance crew and been adopted as unofficial honorary marines. The sudden inclusion by the crew had bemused Liara, who had never even wanted to be an asari commando, when she realized the reason for it. The blind eye the crew gave to their relationship was probably also due to the fact that Liara was a contracted specialist and not in the Alliance chain of command at all, so Shepard wasn’t actually breaking any fraternization rules by being involved with her.

Enough thinking about the things that kept them from spending as much time together as they wanted, Amanda sternly reminded herself, Liara was here with her now, and that certainly deserved more than her divided attention. She switched to Liara’s other breast, and then back and forth between them until her asari lover was writhing beneath her before she continued her explorations in a slow southerly direction across the expanse of toned stomach.

“Amanda,” Liara whispered a sound of love and desire. Shepard felt a gentle mental pressure as her asari lover sought to join with her, to share this moment completely. She welcomed it, surrendered to it, felt the rush of sensation, memory and thought that was not her own as Liara joined their minds and bodies together. This was more than just a casual meld for the mutual enjoyment of sex, that was a brief moment of intense shared pleasure during orgasm. This was a joining, the full melding of their nervous systems into one, the sharing of pleasure as well as thoughts and memories. The first time they had bonded they had needed to be face to face, their full bodies pressed against one another for Liara to mesh their nervous systems so closely together. Now however, the asari was familiar enough with her that full body contact was no longer necessary.

Liara’s taste on her lips, her tongue delicately tormenting the pleasure swollen ridge, slickened with the asari’s arousal. Slowly she explored the entire sensitive length, each flick or long slow caress of her tongue sending lances of pleasure through them both as they experienced it as both giver and receiver. Finally, hands threaded through her hair, pulling her upward. Their bodies pressed together and then moved as one, their pleasure rising until it peaked in an upwelling of joyous emotion and physical release, and over it all the union of their very selves.

Amanda opened her eyes, a choked off cry of pleasure escaping her lips as the climax roared through her body, leaving her trembling and weak in the aftermath of the dream. She reached out, but the space beside her was empty, cold.

She sat up, fighting to regulate her breathing, and then moved to sit on the edge of the bed. She
remained there a moment, remembering how she and Liara had clung together afterward their hearts pounding in unison, their breathing slowly settling. How she had, several minutes later, curled around the asari and they had both fallen into a deep, restful sleep. Memory brought no such comfort now; she didn’t want to lie there anymore, not with the other side of her bed so painfully empty. A shower that’s what she needed, she rose, not bothering with the lights. The window and empty fish tanks provided enough illumination to see where she was going.

Heading to the upper level, she passed by her desk and entered the bathroom. She glanced briefly toward the mirror in the darkness. Blessedly, she didn’t see anything but her reflection, no nightmare image of sinisterly glowing eyes where her face should be. The first time she had gone to the bathroom and not turned on the light, half-asleep until that point, she had yelled in surprise and almost broken the mirror. Thankfully her brain had caught up, if a little belatedly, and she realized it was own image before she had done anything more than lift her arm to strike.

Shepard stripped off her clothing and stepped onto the shower plate in the corner, turning on the water and adjusting the warmth she leant forward letting it beat down on her head and back, the heat soothing. They were still docked at the space station where she had first met with the Illusive Man. Just painting a ship was relatively easy, but LADAR reflecting paint was another matter entirely. It had to be completed section by section, with each one scanned and verified before continuing on to the next. If anything went wrong, that section of paint had to be scrubbed off to bare metal and the process started over from the beginning. Still the ship was over halfway done, and current estimates were that the engineers would be finished sometime tomorrow. Korlus, where Dr. Okeer was located, was too far away for Shepard to feel comfortable about taking the shuttle there with no backup at all, so they were waiting for the Menrva to be ready to go before heading to the planet.

As sweet as the dream had been, Amanda almost wished she hadn’t had it, but apparently her mind had decided that it was time, no matter what else was going on to throw her thoughts into a spinning jumble, to deal with her loneliness and worry over her lover. Liara…it had been just over two years, she took in a breath, forced herself to face a fear that had been growing steadily in the back of her mind. What if Liara had moved on? The asari was so very young for her race, though she was 106… Amanda frowned as she thought of the two years that had passed since she died. Ok, Liara was 108 now, still in comparative human years she was only around twenty or so years old.

When Shepard was in her early twenties she hadn’t been ready to settle down with anyone, the one time she had thought she was deeply in love and promised forever had ended very badly. Sharon had been fifteen years older than she, their courtship sudden, fiery and passionate, Amanda had been so certain that it mean she had found the love of her life. Then her marine unit had been called up for a six-month deployment. She had missed Sharon desperately at first; however, by the time six months had passed, Amanda realized with a sinking heart that she no longer missed Sharon in the same way she had at the beginning.

Amanda had tried, she had tried very hard to recapture the emotion she had felt before, but she had failed. Worse was how much she hurt Sharon, the older woman had been concerned about the difference in their ages, the fact that she was so much younger. Amanda had used all of her powers of persuasion to get Sharon to give them a chance. Only in the end Sharon had been right to be concerned. Once it became clear that things weren’t working between them, the older woman, furious and hurt, and lost no time in reminding Amanda of the fact that she had been the one to persuade Sharon. The experience left an indelible impression on the young woman, and Shepard had never made any promises of love and commitment to anyone until a certain asari archaeologist had snuck in and stolen her heart.

Shepard had rescued Liara, taken her with her in a whirlwind of adventure, danger and heartbreak.
They had been attracted to one another almost immediately, and had become lovers on the eve of a battle neither had been sure they would survive. They had a few precious weeks together on the Citadel before the Council had sent them out hunting for geth, and then Shepard had died.

It had been two years, Amanda didn’t know what she would find on Illium when she finally got there. TIM had mentioned that Liara was working for the Shadow Broker, but Amanda didn’t know if she could trust his information. No matter what Liara was doing though, whether she was an information broker or archaeologist, she knew she couldn’t go in just blindly pretending that everything would magically be alright between them. It might be, Liara might still love her…or Liara might have moved on, or even found someone else.

The look of betrayal, the tears, the angry, hurtful words, she wouldn’t do that to Liara. She would keep herself under control, let the young asari’s reaction to her appearance guide her own reaction. Amanda wouldn’t make the young asari feel like Sharon had made her feel, like the lowest of the low, like she had been unfaithful or betrayed her. You couldn’t be unfaithful to someone who was dead, and she had definitely been dead.

You also couldn’t make someone feel what they didn’t anymore; Amanda knew that from her own bitter experience. If sometime in the past two years the love they felt had faded for the young asari, Shepard would salvage what dignity she could out of the situation and never let Liara know how much it hurt or how much Amanda still loved her.

Goddess she hoped she was wrong, Amanda rested her forehead against the tiled wall, and that everything would turn out alright, her fears proven groundless. That she would find the asari and that they would embrace and then maybe Liara would cry and she probably would as well. They would go back to Liara’s place, talk and hold one another close. And her world would brighten, no matter the fact that she was still working with Cerberus and going on yet another suicidal mission to save the galaxy.

3 days Post Awakening: Citadel

Tela drowsed, lulled by the soft breaths and warmth of the human sleeping within her arms. The asari hadn’t bothered to count the number of orgasms that the two of them had experienced over the course of the past few hours. A smile curved her dark blue lips, too many to count was accurate enough for her. She indulged herself with stroking her cheek against the humans silky caramel colored hair, and breathing in their mingled scent which was quite frankly redolent with the musk of their combined arousal. She was a matron, her mind chose this moment to bring up that fact, time for her to start thinking of finding a bondmate, taking an extended leave of absence for a few centuries, and having children.

Her gaze drifted down, maybe taking a bondmate and an akertira consort like this human and having a child conceived of the best of all three of them instead of using an alien donor partner. The human would be beloved and cherished by both of them, and supported in attaining her professional aspirations if that was what she desired for herself. And if the maiden wanted children in the course of time, her cousin, Jesna, and her bondmate had apparently had a wonderful time with donated sperm and enthusiastically attempting to get their human consort pregnant. Last time she had seen them they both seemed oddly proud of themselves with Leslie, as if they truly had anything to do with the resulting pregnancy but successfully completing the fun part of it. She knew the entire compound was looking forward to helping raise their first human child, a second would certainly be just as welcome.
She curled herself around the human, whose name she was certain now was not Jenna, she thought with a smirk as she stroked her hand along the maiden’s arm. She sighed out a long breath, she wasn’t quite ready yet, she realized with a certain irritation at herself, but soon. That part of herself that wanted a child was getting steadily more insistent, until then…she sighed again, until then she would have to resign herself to brief encounters like this. It was simply too dangerous for her to take a more permanent lover without also taking that leave of absence and removing them both to the Vasir compound on Daessia, deep within the Asari Republics where most of the Vasir matrons went to have their children. It was too bad, she thought with a pang of loneliness as her gaze dropped once again to the deeply slumbering human resting in her arms, she rather thought there might be something special possible with this one.
4 Days Post-Awakening: MSV Menrva

The dim lighting from the fishless fish tanks faintly illuminated the sprawled body on the bed. Tangled sheets around limbs told a silent tale of a less than restful sleep while the twitching underneath closed eyelids betrayed the why.

The sun shone brightly down upon Instructor Suiadan and his student Tuarwen. He was carefully explaining how to focus and maintain a mass effect field of sufficient strength and shape to form a short corridor within which Senior Student Tuarwen would float, safely cushioned and very close to mass free. In this way his student could propel himself across short distances. This use of a mass effect field was very similar to that used by the mass relays to move ships from one relay to the next. Only their corridors spanned many light years and were formed between two different relays. Once sufficiently skilled, Tuarwen would even be able to phase through most objects in his way. Just as the corridors phased through objects provided their mass and gravity was not enough to bend the corridor around them. However, Tuarwen wouldn’t have that level of control over his mass effect field for many more months. This was a very advanced skill and only taught to those Senior Students that showed sufficient aptitude and skill in forming mass effect fields that they were judged able to master it by the instructors.

After the death of Beinion, Suiadan was always careful to teach the required skills in a painstakingly exact step-by-step manner. Making sure his students thoroughly mastered the easier sub-skills involved before putting them all together and teaching them how to master the biotic charge itself. The last thing he wanted was a repeat of that unfortunate incident. It had taken him months of therapy along with the determined support from his wife, Erulassë, and the other Instructors before he had accepted that it hadn’t been his fault. The senior students all knew that while learning such potentially dangerous skills they had to wait for their instructor’s confirmation of each step before proceeding to the next. Unfortunately, Beinion Crometh had been impatient and convinced he should progress at a faster rate than Suiadan was letting him. As a result, the young man had literally torn himself apart after forming his mass effect corridor incorrectly and then charging before a horrified Suiadan could stop him; ending up a bloody and gruesome smear across the long length of the practice field.
Instructor Suiadan frowned, he had students to teach, and teach correctly. They didn’t need for him to get distracted by the past in the middle of a lesson. He turned his attention back to his student…

Sometime later the room’s sound system activated; classical music started playing beginning at a low volume and then steadily increasing until the occupant of the room raised an irritated arm to shut it off. Shepard frowned, there was something she needed to remember but what was it? Fragments of memory rose, sunlight, a field, and…her light grey eyes snapped open as the content of the dream came into focus. Another prothean memory, just like the one with the musician, only this time she at least had a few names to go along with the protheans in the memory. Instructor Suiadan and his wife Erulassë, his student Tuarwen, and the student who had killed himself Beinion Crometh.

Shepard sat up in bed, feeling a chill throughout her body at that particularly macabre memory. She had been performing a prothean biotic charge, an advanced biotic technique taught only to the prothean equivalent of graduate level biotic practitioners. In her ignorance of what she was doing, if she had performed any of steps incorrectly she would have ended up just like Beinion, a red smear across some floor. This was why Miranda had said that no human had yet learned how to charge, you had to master several different biotic skills and then put them all together to successfully perform it.

Thanks to Instructor Suiadan’s memories Amanda could now say with certainty that she knew how to perform each of the necessary steps: How to form the mass effect corridor, how to make herself mass free within that corridor so she could glide within it, and how to protect herself against injury when she came out of the charge by using the remaining mass effect field around her as both a shaped biotic impact attack and deceleration cushion. The dream served as a warning however, not to use these new biotic skills lightly or without caution lest she find out the hard way that she was missing an essential piece of knowledge.

Shepard glanced over at the time, and then with a sigh rose to go take a shower. She rubbed one hand over the lengthening auburn stubble covering her scalp as she went up the stairs to her bathroom. Normally she didn’t mind dreaming, but given the type of dreams she had been experiencing in the few days since her awakening she felt as if she could use a break. It was like they were queuing up in her subconscious waiting for their turn to make an appearance.

After her shower, Shepard went down to the galley for breakfast where Garner was serving up chicken flavored protein strips, waffles, and maple syrup sweetened diced brussel sprouts with bacon. Shepard took a full serving of everything. She had to watch her weight before to make sure she didn’t start losing muscle mass due to being a biotic, and with the changes Miranda had made to her biotic nodes the possibility of that was even greater now.

Sitting down at the table she exchanged greetings with the few crew members there, Crewman Patel, Cremen Rolston and Crewman Hawthorne. None of them really liked the ship’s name change from Normandy to Menrva, as they had all looked forward to serving on the namesake of her original ship, but they did see the reason behind it. As Crewman Hawthorn succinctly put it, “I get it Commander, we’ll run into enough trouble out here without making it for ourselves.” Shepard had to smile at that, it was so typically a colonial attitude.

As she ate, Shepard listened to the banter among them, and asked the occasional leading question about where they were from and what they had done before being assigned to the Normandy. “So, where are you from Crewman Rolston and what’s your first name?” she asked in between bites.

“Vadim, Commander and I’m from New Canton. Born and raised there, met my wife, Marie there
as well. She and my three-month-old daughter, Susanna, still live there now, but Cerberus is paying for their relocation to Earth.”

“Congratulations to the two of you,” Shepard said with a warm smile and noted the information away in her mind. “I guess you’re worried about the Collector attacks?”

“Sure am,” he replied, “I worry about them being out there with those things targeting our colonies.”

Shepard nodded, “Understandable,” she turned to the two other crewmen and asked, “How about you two, where are you from?”

Crewman Patel’s name was Sarah, originally from Terra Nova but more recently more of a wanderer serving on various merchant ships as an engineer. “That’s how I met Vadim actually, we needed to pick up parts for the ship and New Canton was the closest. Vadim helped me install them.”

“Oh,” Shepard inquired curiously glancing over at him, “so your also an engineer?” He was, he had mechanical and engineering know how by working first helping his father with the family’s farm equipment and then apprenticing to an older mechanic in town. “And you,” she raised an inquiring brow at Crewman Hawthorn the last of the trio. By now she wasn’t surprised when he informed her that he had learned his trade as a sensor tech out of the Terra Nova Technical School, and then found a posting at the port on Ferris Fields. Fortunately, he had joined Cerberus a few months before the colony had been hit by the Collectors but all his friends from the colony had been taken.

“I hope we can get them back,” he told her, even though she could tell that he was not really that optimistic they were still alive after all these months.

“Hopefully,” she replied, “that’s what we are all here for, to stop the Collectors and try to free the colonists they’ve already taken.” The three of them seemed reassured by her statement, and left shortly afterward to start their duty shifts leaving her to her thoughts.

Shepard already knew that Gartner, who did everything from cooking to janitorial work, had served on the eezo-rigs along the frontier colonies until he lost everything to batarian raiders. Now with these three she could see a definite trend and one that she didn’t like at all. Shepard didn’t discount any of their experiences, colonial life tended to breed people who were much tougher and mature than the average Earther. However, none of them had any military experience at all and that was concerning for multiple reasons. Combat could make an unexperienced person, freeze, panic, or fight, or any combination of the three. Military training was in part designed to teach military personnel to correctly perform their duties even during the stress of combat. An untested crew…they might do anything, and that could be disastrous at just the wrong moment. Thank Goddess she had Joker in the cockpit, Shepard thought, and not someone whose only experience was piloting merchant ships even if they were used to evading pirates and slavers.

Shepard groaned as she thought about what to do about the situation, not seeing any way around the only solution. In addition to trying to get her growing ground team to actually act like a team, she now also needed to run regular drills for crew training. Maybe she could get Miranda to help with that, she thought, since the woman claimed to be her second in command. Drills were something an XO usually designed and ran, she should know she had run quite a few of them herself. Amanda shook her head, what in the hell was the Illusive Man thinking with giving her all these green personnel? The time it was going to take to get them trained to a sufficient level so they might not get everyone killed during their first actual experience of combat was going to impact on their ability to go after the Collectors.
“Commander,” Dr. Chakwas voice interrupted her thoughts, and she glanced over inquiringly at the older woman who was standing just outside her office. “I’d like for you to come by my office to discuss the results of those scans we took yesterday.”

“Of course,” Shepard rose and took her tray over to Gardner before following the older woman into her office. As before, Chakwas waited until they both were seated, the shutters were down and the door sealed before speaking.

“Well,” Chakwas began, “I’m not sure if this is good news or not, but I did find physical evidence confirming that the drell neurochemicals Cerberus used have changed the way your memories are accessed and stored. So, it looks like that is indeed the reason behind the difference in how your memories were before your death and how they are now.”

She hesitated for the barest moment before continuing, “And I also found something else unusual in your neurological scan.” The doctor turned around and typed on her keyboard for a moment, pulling up scans of a human brain. “These are the neurological scans I did of you the other day. What concerns me is this area here,” Dr. Chakwas pointed out one dimly lit area on the display that looked like fine strands of an intricate and multilayered spiderweb. “These appear to be memories, but they’re not where you would normally find them in a human,” the display changed, “this is where I would expect to see memory activity, this particular area in your temporal lobe and around the hippocampus, and as you see, you do have memories located here. They appear a little different from I would expect, but as I mentioned, the increased synaptic pathway potentiation I’m seeing is due to the effects of the drell neurochemicals.”

“Interestingly, this area of the temporal lobe, if you were an asari that is,” Dr. Chakwas continued, “would be where memories shared during a meld would be stored. But the information we have on humans melding with asari shows that the new memories are stored in the same place as normally obtained memories. Human brains don’t distinguish between the two different types of memories when storing them.”

Even though her mind was racing at this information, Shepard kept her deception in mind when she responded, “The beacon messages? For the memories that are located where an asari would store them, I mean. Maybe they went there?” It had to be the Cipher, even though Shiala had not mentioned anything about it being composed of the memories of different protheans. The Cipher was supposed to be the very essence of being prothean and allow her to think like a Prothean: to understand their culture, their history, their very existence. Shepard knew she had never fully understood it, but she had understood enough to interpret the beacon’s visions and to understand the language of the warning message they had found on Ilos.

Green eyes glanced up at her for a moment, before the Doctor nodded, “Now that’s an interesting possibility. When I made the neural scans of you after the incidents on Eden Prime, Feros and Virmire, the diagnostic equipment on the original Normandy couldn’t really tell me anything except that you had abnormally high beta waves and that you didn’t appear to have any neurological damage. But then that equipment was mean only for basic neurological diagnostics so you could stabilize your patient long enough to get them to a proper medical facility, and not diagnosing unknown conditions cause by direct data input from ancient beacons or asari mind melds,” she commented dryly.

Shepard grinned, relieved that Chakwas was going along with keeping the existence of the Cipher hidden. “I always like to keep you on your toes doctor.”

“That you do,” Chakwas agreed with a smile. She turned to look at the Medical bay, “I have to say I
appreciate the diagnostic and medical equipment I have available to me here. This medical bay is almost up to the same standards as your average colonial hospital, and the only reason it’s not is because there simply isn’t room for some of the more specialized diagnostic and treatment equipment.”

“If there’s anything we can upgrade, just let me know and I’ll see what can be done. We’re probably going to need to be as self-sufficient as possible in the Terminus systems. You will need to be able to treat most injuries right here.” Shepard was quite serious about this; she didn’t want anyone dying for lack of proper medical care.

Dr. Chakwas nodded and her green eyes narrowed as she glanced keenly around the medical bay, “I’ll look into it, and once we get Dr. Solus onboard I’ll ask if he has any suggestions as well.”

Shepard straightened preparing to leave, “Well, if there is nothing else?”

The white-haired woman returned her attention to Shepard, “Actually, I would like to try something if you have about thirty minutes Commander.”

Shepard raised one curious brow at the doctor, “I do. What were you thinking?”

“Well, if this is the beacon messages,” Dr. Chakwas responded, “then I’d expect to see activity in that area of your temporal lobe when you access one of them.”

“When I access one of the messages,” Shepard repeated, trying to decipher exactly what the older woman was asking of her. “You just want me to think of one of the one’s I’ve already deciphered?” she offered tentatively.

Dr. Chakwas nodded, “Precisely, we’re only trying to determine if those are indeed the beacon messages. So, if you’ll just wait for me to get set up?” It only took a few minutes for the doctor to place the sensory pads on her forehead and around her scalp. “Now think about one of the beacon messages you’ve already recalled and deciphered.”

Since it was still on her mind, Amanda’s thoughts went immediately to her earlier dream and Instructor Suiadan teaching his student Tuarwen in the sunny field. A review of the techniques wouldn’t hurt her, after all…she was all for avoiding messy incidents.

Approximately forty minutes later, “This is very interesting,” Dr. Chakwas commented staring at the scan results intently. “It’s like there is another complete second set of memories stored within your brain encompassing all the different types of memory, semantic, episodic, visual and sensory.”

“Here look,” Chakwas typed in a few commands and pulled up two different images and then overlaid them, “See, here are the different declarative memory areas in the temporal lobe, but also look at the other memory storage areas of the brain in the hippocampus, amygdala, striatum, and mammillary bodies. See how the active areas shifted?”

Shepard did see it, it wasn’t much of a shift, but it was clear that different areas were being accessed in the two different scans. “That’s the…” she barely stopped herself from saying Cipher and instead said, “beacon messages then.” Shepard stared at the display uneasily. Shiala had said that the Thorian had absorbed prothean bodies. Apparently in that process it had absorbed their memories as well. Protheans like Lindariel, Suiadan, and the young musician presumably from the education complex above it. It really hadn’t sunk in before that she had the memories of people who had been dead for over fifty thousand years in her mind. Memories that were now rising to the surface of her
conscious mind instead of remaining locked away as part of the Cipher. Had this happened to Shiala as well wondered Shepard, and how could she possibly get a secure message to the asari to ask her?

5 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel

“So how were your days off,” Arana Vare inquired, glancing over at Tela where she was waiting for the Councilor to finish a holo-call that had obviously taken much longer than the matriarch had expected when the nais scheduled this meeting with her.

Tela smiled at the lavender hued matron, “Very pleasant, Sha’ira made a very good choice of a consort companion for me. Worth every bit of her fee.” That had been 25,000 credits plus another 15,000 credits for the use of the space and spa package beforehand for both of them. Relatively inexpensive compared to the services of asari akertira consorts, but then the humans Sha’ira was sponsoring did not have decades of training.

“Akertira?” asked Arana.

“Mmm,” Tela inclined her head, “Her consort name is Jenna, very sweet young human maiden. Sha’ira said she is attending the University, xeno-biology and pre xeno-medical programs. Probably intending on being a doctor in one of the mixed communities in the Republics or the League."

The secretary shook her head, “Strange that the humans have so many akertira among them,” she commented, “so many of them just seem so self-absorbed and always rushing and pushing to obtain their desires no matter what anyone else needs. Fortunate though, at least for us,” the secretary continued. “Even with so few humans willing to assist as a akertira in triad reproductive melds, it's still become much easier to have a child with your bondmate and a akertira consort than it was before they were discovered. Was she nice? Personality wise I mean?”

Tela raised one brow at the unexpected question, “She seemed so, but I couldn’t really say I know her well enough to make such a judgment. I might have been in her mind, but I respected her privacy.”

“Of course,” Arana gave her a reproachful look “you know full well I wasn’t implying anything like that, Tela. What did she seem like from her surface thoughts?”

Vasir sighed in mock exasperation and then actually considered the question, “Nice, smart, maybe a bit serious for being a maiden.”

“Hmmm,” Arana returned her attention to her display. “Better a serious doctor than a frivolous one,” she commented and then veered off to another subject. “It’s a shame they have to hide that they’re consorts, but I understand they can face some very unpleasant reactions from other humans over it.”

“They can,” Tela agreed, “it’s why Sha’ira arranges for employment at one of her other business here on the Citadel.” She smirked, “I understand they spend their work time actually studying or sleeping.”

“Well, that’s a nice arrangement for them,” Arana replied somewhat absently as she looked up from the screen, “and the Councilor is free now.”

Vasir grunted as she got up from the chair placed next to the secretary’s desk, “Thanks, Arana, and thanks for getting her to wait until I was actually off my leave time.”

The secretary laughed softly, “You're fortunate the Councilor only had to wait a few hours, she
seemed set on only speaking to you.”

The Spectre frowned at that, “I shouldn’t keep her waiting then,” she inclined her head to the other matron and then exited the secretary’s office. Making her way to the doorway at the end of the hallway she waved her hand across it’s sensor. The doors immediately parted, letting her into the Councilors office. She glanced around the semi-circular room, Councilor Tevos was standing near the windows, looking out over the Presidium. A data pad was in her hand, one which she was glancing over as the matron came into her office.

“Tela,” the Councilor turned and greeted her, with what was for the matriarch an unusual expression of disquiet. “You recall the attack on Fehl Prime a few months ago, and news of Cerberus’ assisting the Collectors in their attack on the colony in exchange for information.”

“The beacon Dr. Nuwani interacted with while on the Collector ship,” the Spectre doubted she would forget what she had learned at that debriefing any time soon. She still didn't know quite what to think of Dr. Nuwani’s assertions about the contents of the beacon message. Especially since she essentially repeated Shepard’s claims that the Protheans were eradicated by the Reapers, only with a new twist. That the Reapers had created the Collectors from the Protheans, and that the Collectors were now collecting humans to create a Reaper from their genetic material. Unfortunately, Dr. Nuwani’s claims were just as questionable as Shepard's. Everyone who came into contact with an active beacon and survived it interpreted the message through their own experiences, and in this case Dr. Nuwani was mentored by Dr. Liara T'Soni. Thus, her interpretation had been quietly discounted by a majority of the Council as having been influenced by what she knew of Shepard's vision by way of Dr. T’Soni.

Or maybe it had not, Councilor Tevos had privately asked the asari Spectres to report anything they heard concerning the Collectors or any further information on any ships matching the Geth dreadnought that had attacked the Citadel to her office. Tela was also aware that the Republics Navy had begun an out of cycle, as in over a century early, update and refitting overhaul for the entire Fleet. From what she had heard from her various cousins, that effort had been upgraded in priority only a few weeks after she had escorted Dr. Nuwani to Thessia. Publicity the refit effort was due to the deficiencies exposed by the Geth’s attack on the Destiny Ascension. That was true, insofar as Tela knew and what had passed the plebiscite for funding. However, the speed and urgency behind the refit schedule, necessitating just about every shipyard in Republics space to go to a full three shift operational capacity, that was unusual and expensive for a supposed non-emergency refit.

“Councilor Anderson received a troubling report from the Quarian Migrant Fleet yesterday,” Vasir returned her full attention to the Councilor. “They forwarded to him a full report on the data collected by one of their pilgrims, a Veetor’Nara, on the recent Collector attack of the independent human colony Freedom’s Progress.” Tevos paced across the office, away from the windows and toward her desk. “They also sent a copy of the data to Cerberus at the request of Spectre Shepard, who was also present on Freedom’s Progress seeking information about who or what was behind the disappearances of the human colonies.” Tela frowned, that made no sense, Shepard was dead, but she remained silent for surely the Councilor wasn’t done with her briefing. “When the Fleet lost contact with Veetor’Nara on Freedom’s Progress they sent a quarrian team to search for him. The team was led by Tali’Zorah vas Neema, Shepard’s quarian crewmember on the Normandy. During their search her team made contact with Spectre Shepard as well as two Cerberus members who joined with and assisted them in their search for Veetor’Nara.”

Tevos glanced over at her and Vasir took this as an invitation to speak, “Cerberus knows who is attacking the colonies, they assisted the Collectors with their attack on Fehl Prime. Who is this that Cerberus has pretending to be Shepard and why are they attempting this deception? What do they have to gain from it?” She paused and then added, “Whomever it is, they must be fairly good to
deceive a former crew member.”

The Councilor inclined her head, “We forwarded the report to the Spectre office for investigation, then a few hours later we received a report from Citadel Intelligence flagged for our attention based on the earlier report we sent to them. This report concerned a Terminus Systems human terrorist known only by the name of Jack who was freed from the prison ship Purgatory approximately twenty hours earlier. The report was flagged for our attention because the escape was orchestrated by Cerberus personnel who were assisted by Spectre Shepard.”

Tela’s brow rose at this, “Busy aren’t they,” she observed and then frowned, “but what do the two things have to do with one another?”

“Indeed,” nodded Tevos, “Seeking further information I forwarded a request to Republics Intelligence Services. The reply came back with the Council of Matriarch’s seal of authorization.” That was…definitely interesting, noted Vasir, that meant that the Council had to specifically authorize the release of that information to the Councilor. “Approximately a week after the destruction of the Normandy one of their assets on Omega Station witnessed the Blue Suns attempting to exchange Spectre Shepard’s body to operatives of the Shadow Broker.” The Councilor paused for a moment, her gaze meeting her Spectre’s dark brown eyes. Vasir stiffened for a half-second, then minutely shook her head, she had heard nothing of this, but then that wasn’t very surprising. She received very little free information from the Shadow Broker. Tevos minutely frowned, then continued, “The exchange was interrupted by a third party assisted by Cerberus. RIS believes that Cerberus ultimately ended up with Shepard’s body.”

Cerberus ended up with Shepard’s body, Tela took a moment to consider that piece of information. She frowned, “So these sightings, they could possibly be Shepard? But why would she assist Cerberus, she took down several of their operations while searching for Saren?” Something else occurred to her, “Did RIS give any hints as to the identity of this third party that assisted Cerberus?”

Tevos sighed, “Yes they did, the third party was Dr. Liara T’Soni.”

That stopped Tela short as her mind churned to make sense of the information, “They must have offered her something she desperately wanted…” she through aloud, then the answer came to her. What would an maiden missing her lover want above all things, “They promised her Shepard, alive.”

The matriarch inclined her head in response, “That does seem the logical answer, but the report does not mention a reason for her decision to assist them or to turn Shepard’s body over to them.”

“Could they actually have done it?” Two years though, thought Vasir dubiously, surely if Shepard was in any shape to be revived it would have taken them less than two years?

“Unlikely,” Councilor Tevos replied, eliciting the matron’s full attention, “the footage RIS sent me from the prison ship Purgatory indicates that this cannot possibly be Shepard…or at least not the Shepard that we inducted as a Spectre.” Tela’s brow rose, what did that mean? “You will recall the controversy surrounding the North American States President Huerta last month?”

“Yes,” the asari Spectre frowned searching for everything she knew of the decidedly unusual news. “You’re thinking the method they used to preserve his memories was possibly used for Shepard?”

Then, in a flash of insight, Tela realized, “You believe the technology was originally designed by Cerberus for Shepard?”

“I do,” the Councilor responded, “Councilor Valern with Councilor Anderson’s assistance is investigating the source of the technology used on President Huerta. As for this actually being Shepard,” Tevos continued, “as I mentioned, the camera footage from the prison ship makes it clear
that the…entity claiming to be Spectre Shepard cannot possibly be her,” the Councilor hesitated and then added, “Or cannot be the individual she was before her death.”

Vasir stared at the Councilor bemused, even for a matriarch that seemed like an excessively convoluted statement. “I’m not sure I understand Councilor,” she admitted after a moment.

Tevos raised one brow, “Reviewing the footage from the prison ship will make it clear.”

Intriguing, Tela decided as she followed the matriarch further back into the Councilor’s offices. They entered the Councilor’s personal conference room with its long oval table, and as the matriarch waved her over to a seat Tevos brought up the captured video footage from the prison ship Purgatory. Tela found it interesting that the individual Warden Kuril was certain was Shepard never actually introduced herself as such, and unlike the other two humans, didn’t wear armor painted in Cerberus colors or marked with their insignia. RIS, however, had been very thorough as usual and had all the data the turian had used to make a positive identity match. A vocal print and a facial recognition program match. Tela wasn’t quite so sure though, this ‘Shepard’ had never taken her helmet off and that made spoofing both or either one much simpler.

Catching the Councilor’s attention, the Spectre inquired, “The report from the Migrant Fleet, did it mention if she was wearing a helmet the full time on Freedom’s Progress?”

“It did not, but I suspect that was the case as the colonies mechs were re-programed by Veetor’Nara to attack anything that moved within their sensor range.”

Vasir nodded, “How was her identity confirmed by this Tali’Zorah?”

“Personal knowledge,” Tevos responded, “she knew what pilgrimage gift Tali’Zorah brought back to the Fleet. It was apparently known only between them on the Normandy.”

Vasir nodded, “So if they were able to make a synthetic copy of her memory functions and this…” She recalled the term Tevos had used earlier, and now it made perfect sense to her. “This individual now has those memories, then who or what is this individual?” She paused considering her own question, “Is this actually Shepard, a clone, or even a Cerberus Operative with her memories and reconstructive facial surgery?”

“We are not certain,” the Councilor responded and her disquieted expression had returned, “and this footage only whips the waves higher, agitating the waters.” She forwarded the scene on the display to a certain point and then let it play. In it, the individual identified as Shepard flash-stepped from one side of a room to just beside the room’s doorway. ‘This occurred immediately after the station’s Warden informed the Cerberus team that he was planning on imprisoning them for their bounties rather than releasing the prisoner Jack to them. You can see why I said that it only agitated the waters.”

Tela stiffened in amazement, she could indeed see why this agitated the waters. The last she knew humans had only mastered a biotic sprint. Mastering the biotic charge was a long process of mastering several different biotic skills that cumulated with the knowledge and skills necessary to safely perform the charge itself. A flash-step was yet another level of mastery of the charge, one only gained after one’s mastery of the charge reached an almost instinctual level. She should know, she had mastered both biotic skills by the age of 67 and was quite aware of how unusual her mastery at such a young age had been among even her fellow Huntresses. Her biotic proficiency was what had earned her one of the rare early invitations to commando training.

How long it took to learn both…depended on the biotic ability of the practitioner. First, charges required a biotic with a deep biotic reserve, a decent biotic surge and high discrimination ability.
Then it required learning the base skills for the biotic charge, mastering them, putting them altogether to learn how to charge, then practicing the charge over and over and over until each step became so quick and instinctual that you were flash-stepping - because the flash-step was not a different skill at all, it was the complete mastery of the charge.

The individual on the display had just utilized it as if she were a master of the skill, placing herself within inches of a solid metal wall that, if she had misjudged her flash-step, would have resulted in her death. Almost as if reading her mind, the Councilor asked, “Would you have placed yourself so close to that wall Tela?”

The Spectre shook her head, “No, I would have placed myself farther away. Unless there is a reason you might not be able to take that final step, there is no reason to risk misplacing yourself inside the wall instead of beside it.” The matron shrugged, “I could place myself that close and have before, but in that situation, I would not have chosen to do so.”

When the Councilor didn’t immediately respond Tela continued, “I certainly wouldn’t say that a human can’t learn how to flash step, but given that I learned it young at sixty-seven, I would expect it to be a much older human that first succeeded at mastering the skill. I would also expect it to be human that had first learned the biotic charge,” Tela added with a slight frown, “and as far as I know no human has yet done so?”

“Some are beginning to learn the underlying skills,” Tevos responded, “but they are not yet there.”

“Had Shepard begun learning any of them?” As far as Vasir knew, Shepard hadn’t been a particularly strong biotic for a human. She had been known more for her use of strategy and tactics, as well as her leadership ability and occasional diplomatic successes.

“No,” the Councilor shook her head, “thus our doubt that this could actually be Shepard.” The matriarch let out a slight sigh, “And there is more that casts even deeper doubt and confusion on this individual’s identity.”

Of course, there was, thought Tela, as Tevos un-paused the security footage. They observed in silence the unfolding combat with ‘Shepard’ making yet another flash step and then responding to the guards flanking attempt by covering her exposed team with a biotic shield barrier. Not an uncommon biotic skill, and certainly not unknown to human biotics. She glanced over questioningly to the Councilor.

“Shepard was capable of holding a brief defensive barrier,” Tevos responded to her unspoken question.

The barrier was not held briefly, and the closer Vasir observed the small details she could make out the more impressed she was with it. “I believe my biotics trainers in Commando training would be pleased with that effort, though they would want to see a much larger sphere,” she observed to the matriarch. “It seems to be an exceptionally well-formed and held dark energy matrix.”

“Indeed,” the Councilor agreed with her, but she did not look pleased.

Tela wasn’t surprised, how had Cerberus managed this? The amount of training necessary to learn these skills at the level of expertise she was witnessing was lengthy and involved. She had begun her basic biotic training as a very young child, then entered huntress training at forty. The skills necessary to learn a biotic charge had not been taught until near the end of her huntress training. Most huntress trainees did not master the underlying skills before they finished their training at the academy, instead mastering them afterward. She had been one of the few students who mastered the skills and learned how to put them together to perform the biotic charge during her time at her
academy. Then it had taken her another fourteen years to master the charge to a sufficient level to be able to perform a flash-step.

Vasir grimaced as she considered the possibility that Cerberus had taken a young biotic child and concentrated only on teaching them biotic skills, ignoring everything else. Without the ability to meld with one's trainers to assist with learning the required skills, perhaps such a human child could learn the necessary skills late in their second decade of life or early in their third. Knowing what she did of the human supremacist group she wouldn’t put it past them to mistreat one of their own children in such a manner if they thought the reward was great enough. “Could they,” she paused, knowing that she was wildly guessing at this point, “could Cerberus have a biotic with these skill levels and then somehow transfer that knowledge over by combining it in the synthetic memory copy?”

“That is a possibility that I considered as well,” Tevos inclined her head in agreement, “and another question Councilor Valern will seek the answer to during his investigation of the technology used on President Huerta.”

“So the question remains,” mused the asari Spectre, “could this actually be Shepard? If they did revive her and somehow teach her these techniques, then why is she still working with them instead of returning to Citadel space? She claims she is investigating the source of the colony disappearances, but we and they already know the Collectors are behind the attacks.”

Tela frowned, it simply did not make sense, if it were Shepard surely she would return to the Citadel as soon as she was able and then they could inform her of Cerberus’s involvement in the attacks. That would certainly sever whatever tie they had on the human and turn her against them. If this were a clone however, or even a Cerberus operative with reconstructive surgery and false protein markers to fool DNA scanners, which was difficult and expensive but theoretically possible, then they would be letting an infiltrator into the inner circles of the Council, one with Spectre authority. “If this is a conditioned clone or even a Cerberus operative with Shepard’s memories and modified to persuade us this is the human’s Spectre…”

“Then we would be letting a sorat into our midst,” responded the Councilor with a regal nod. “With such technology even if this is Shepard, there would be the possibility that during the time her memories were held in the synthetic matrix they were tampered with or conditioning was added that would allow Cerberus to control her. Councilor Anderson was resistant, but even he had to admit to the possibility of Cerberus attempting such a deception.”

Vasir frowned, she could see that as well, Cerberus would have much to gain if they were given that level of access. This might even be part of their plan for their new anti-biotic agent. The nais glanced up at the screen, “Is there anything else you wished to show me?” Maybe there were some answers within it to these questions, though by the Councilor’s demeanor she rather thought there would only be more questions raised.

Tevos returned her attention to the display, “Yes, though the footage is unfortunately not continuous. The Cerberus operatives were able to disable the cameras covering the observation room overlooking the prisoners cryo-chamber. Though RIS does have this image of how they gained access to the room without activating the YMIR mechs inside.” A picture of a thick glass wall panel with the center of it neatly removed and placed over to the side appeared on the display. “They then used remote detonated grenades to destroy the mechs.”

Tela had to admire Cerberus’s tactics, but, “How did they remove the glass? Plasma cutter?”

“No,” Tevos responded, “the edges showed no evidence of melting, instead the glass was very precisely shattered along each side and then pulled out.”
“Huh,” the matron frowned, not many things could do that type of damage. “Resonance?” She finally voiced her guess, even though it wasn’t a very good one, “but that type of equipment is rather bulky, they didn’t bring it in on them.”

The matriarch shook her head, “We do not know, it is yet another mystery to add to the rest.”

Vasir frowned, “Mysteries to which we need answers. What do you want me to investigate?” She knew the Councilor wouldn’t have summoned her if the matriarch didn’t already have plan which required her participation to successfully bring to fruition.

“After Trident and the evidence of what Cerberus was researching there, I am not inclined to assist Cerberus in any manner. Much less letting them infiltrate the Citadel and gain Spectre level access.” The Councilors tone was unusually hard, but then what had happened on Trident had not only been terrible in the sense that their people had been tortured, but also in the threat implicit in the bio-weapon Cerberus had been testing. An agent that could permanently nullify an asari’s biotic abilities was not something that the Republics would take lightly. Cerberus had managed to elevate itself from just another xenophobic terrorist group to presenting an actual danger to the security and safety of the Republics.

“Maybe we could use this ‘Shepard’ whether real or not to lead us to Cerberus?” Tela raised the possibility. The Collectors and their activities were a concern, mainly because of the possibility that the Council of Matriarchs was taking the Reaper threat seriously, but not as immediate of a concern in Vasir’s mind as Cerberus’ recent activities.

“That is the only reason I did not support Councilor Sparatus in his bid to have her arrested, along with whatever Cerberus personnel accompanying her, the moment she enters Citadel space,” Tevos admitted. She turned toward Tela, “I want you to go to Illium and speak with Liara T’Soni, ascertain her motivations, and find out the exact condition of Shepard’s body when she turned it over to Cerberus. Such information might cast a light on whether there is any realistic probability that Cerberus managed to revive Spectre Shepard or not.”

Just then the Councilors omni-tool flashed, causing Tevos to glance at it and then frown at the short message she saw upon it. The matriarch tapped at her bracelet, bringing up the full haptic display to view what must be an emergency message. The matriarch’s frown deepened, “The economic data the Volus have been demanding to see has just been posed upon the Extranet.”

“Which means that the Ministry of Finance has a data leakage,” Vasir realized almost immediately. Both of them were silent for a moment, each of them running a list of available Spectres through their minds with the necessary skill sets to investigate the data leakage…and coming to the same conclusion. “I’m the best choice to investigate,” Vasir acknowledged, “do you wish me to pass off the T’Soni investigation to Spectre M’Tara?”

The matriarch pondered the question for a moment before slowly shaking her head, “Not for now, if the delay proves to be too long I can always request the information through the T’Soni Potinia.”

Tela nodded, “Very well, then I will begin my investigation into the data leakage immediately.”
Part 1: Chapter 9::7 Days Post-Awakening: MSV Menrva

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: The Mass Effect universe is the property of Bioware/Electronic Arts. No infringement of these copyrights is intended as this is a not for profit fan fiction work.

Rewrite Notes: Still inspired by the Beyonce song “Save the Hero,” from the album I am…Sasha Fierce.

Author’s Notes: Ithil meril - moon blade or warp blade. Greek…Google translator, its probably not that correct. If you know Greek feel free to help out.

Revision History: 12/05/2017; 6/6/2018

7 Days Post-Awakening: MSV Menrva

While the Eagle Nebula was claimed by the League of the Terminus, the system within which the Nebula’s relay stations and main fuel depot were located, the Imir System, was neutral territory along with the single garden world of the system Korlus. Unfortunately for the planet itself, centuries of unregulated industrial growth, most of it related to the planets main source of commerce which was stripping and recycling decommissioned starships, rendered it a garden world by name only. The surface was now one large toxic junkyard, littered with skeletal starship remains deemed too unprofitable to recycle and with an atmosphere so polluted that only krogan could go outside without wearing protective garments and using a rebreather apparatus. The population of the planet was a diverse mixture of the Terminus System races, with batarians, krogans, asari and turians dominating. Very few humans lived and worked on the planet, which meant that any new human faces would stand out in the crowd. Combine that with the fact that slavery was legal on Korlus - one of the reasons it tenaciously held to its independent status - and Shepard was very pleased that Jacob had received the Anoydine Armor he had requisitioned after their earlier discussion.

Jack initially snarled at the idea of wearing any armor, but Amanda had suspected the woman might and had come well prepared for the possibility. One graphic video later, showing the effects of Korlus’ acid rain on the unprotected skin of some very unfortunate batarian slave, and the convict was easily persuaded that she did not want to ruin her body art by exposing it to the planets heavily polluted atmosphere. It probably wouldn’t prove deadly or even permanently disfiguring, but the exposure would definitely be painful. Korlus was certainly not a garden world any longer. All four members of the ground team had their first fitting and customization meeting in the Armory two days ago, and Shepard had recently received news that Jacob expected to finish up with the armor in time for them to have their final fitting this afternoon. The MSV Menrva’s paint job was finished as well, the engineers had tested and signed off on the final section of paint just last night. The asari shuttle in the shuttle bay had been thoroughly stripped and refurbished with the latest armoring, electronics and weaponry. In short, they were ready to take the Menrva out on her first official mission, and see if they could recruit the second name TIM had supplied, Warlord Okee.

Shepard had never been to Korlus, something she had never been particularly despondent over considering the fact it was considered to the junkyard of the Terminus. Right now though, as she worked up the mission parameters, she wished she had been on a mission there at least once. It
would be helpful to not have to rely on Cerberus intelligence regarding the planetary defenses they needed to slip past as well as Okeer’s own defenses and the defenses of the mercenary group he was currently associated with, Ragar Kolo. Cerberus intelligence had already let them down once in that they hadn’t warned them that they had bounties on them what were worth more than Cerberus had been willing to pay for Jack. Amanda hadn’t been exactly inclined to think much of any department named Cerberus Intelligence before the Purgatory mission…and she had been proven correct. Unfortunately being right came with the downside that they were the only intelligence source currently available to her. Life just really sucked like that sometimes, Shepard reflected with bitter amusement as she considered the problem.

She needed insurance, an edge, she was about to lead what was essentially a civilian team into a combat mission where they would be facing superior numbers of primarily batarians and krogan that would be only too pleased to take them alive and sell them into slavery if they failed. Which reminded her, Amanda thought grimly, to make provisions for a worst-case scenario. She made a quick note on her omni-tool and sent off a message to Dr. Chakwas, hopefully they had the necessary drug on board already. That task completed, she concentrated on the next possible problem: that there was no guarantee that Warlord Okeer would even be willing to talk to them instead of leaving them to his mercenary confederates. There were way too many ifs to this mission for her to feel comfortable with it…especially as she had a team where two of the members were intent on competing with one another to find out who was the best biotic. Currently, she planned on splitting the team into two groups of two, Miranda and Jacob and she and Jack. If the former convict needed someone to compete with she could provide that, and hopefully shape it to her advantage. She already knew that Jack was a bit wary of the range of biotic abilities she displayed during their escape from the prison ship Purgatory. She couldn’t see any reason not to build on that reputation with the tattooed woman if it gave her a bit of credit with the former Cerberus captive. For one, it might earn her more information about Jack’s background with the supremacist group, fill in blanks that would let her understand the prickly woman better.

In the meantime, however, thought Shepard, she still needed that edge. Splitting up Miranda and Jack was just insurance that she would still have two biotics at the end of the mission instead of them getting each other killed. Maybe there was something in the Cipher that would be of use to her? Shepard pondered the possibility as well as the difficulties and hazards that came with such a search. First how would she find it? That question had an easy answer; with any luck, she could find it in the same way she had stumbled on Elder Instructor Lindariel’s memories. Focus on what she needed to know and hope there was something matching in the Cipher whole enough that she could recall it as a full memory. Second, if she lost herself in a prothean memory again how would she ‘wake’ herself up from it and keep what was going on hidden from the ship’s monitoring devices and the AI monitoring them? That was the a more difficult question, and she wasn’t exactly sure of the answer. Before, it had only taken seeing Liara’s picture to break her out of it. Amanda considered that for a moment, maybe all she needed was to scatter some items around the room that when noticed would well…remind her of herself?

She glanced around the mostly bare room, the issue was of course she didn’t exactly have many personal mementos at the moment. Maybe she could make some however, just a few pictures would probably do the trick and would be simple enough to create with the micro-fabricator built into her omni-tool. A few Extranet searches later and she was rewarded with a picture of her parents, Robert and Fiona Shepard, and his grandmother Alexandria. A few more searches and she had another four pictures. One from Mindoir of the grasslands where she had grown up and the other three from Earth, the Acropolis of Athens Greece lit up at dusk, the Sanhurst Military Preparatory Academy where she had gone to school after moving to Earth to live with her grandmother Alexandria after Mindoir, and one of the winding Hudson River in upper New York State where her grandmother’s estate was located.
Amanda glanced around the room once again after the pictures were all placed, the framed picture of her parents on the nightstand beside the bed, her grandmother’s picture on her desk, and the landscape pictures on the walls. Besides hopefully serving their hidden practical use, the pictures also made the room look less bare and un-lived in. She didn’t know if that were good or bad, for one it felt as if she were settling in and accepting working with Cerberus when that definitely wasn’t the case. Shepard shrugged, irritated at that thought. The pictures didn’t need to mean anything other than she didn’t want to stare at bare grey metal walls anymore, and to serve the purpose for which she had put them up there in the first place. Speaking of which, she sat down on the couch, thought about what sort of biotic skill might be useful in protecting both herself and her team mates from defeat. She needed something that would allow her to stand toe to toe with a biotic batarian or even a krogan. To her frustration, nothing happened, no memory took over her mind, no prothean usurped her awareness.

Realizing what she was thinking Amanda barked out a single harsh sounding laugh, then groaned and buried her face in her hands, most people would probably not want some memory imprint from some long dead person to take over their bodies. She snorted, then again, most people had not woken up from being dead in the middle of someone’s attempt to kill them for a second time. Or spent the last seven days distracting themselves from thinking too much about things they couldn’t do anything about while stuck on an enemy ship where her every move was observed and recorded for some behavioral psychologist to go over and figure out how to manipulate her into working for Cerberus. Her jaw clenched as she thought about the likelihood of being under observation even now in her own quarters and then her nerves tingled as a dark energy field protectively formed around her body in response to her thoughts.

Enough! Amanda lifted her head from her hands, and dropped the biotic field. Whether it was true or not dwelling on it, worrying about it, was for the moment a useless activity that would only add to her stress while doing nothing to help the situation. She squared her back, then consciously relaxed her shoulders, closed her eyes and focused on one of the controlled breathing/meditative exercise she had first learned from Madame LeCroix, in her childhood, expanded upon in her training under Mistress Leonora, and then taught again during her initial N training. This one was specifically meant for clearing the mind and focusing one’s thoughts when under stressful conditions. Perhaps once the militaries of Earth had scoffed at such ‘new age’ concepts, but then medical science had come out that backed the ancient practices of controlled breathing, revealing the biological feedback circuit that allowed it to regulate the brains emotional control center among other things, including lowering one’s blood pressure. After that, the newly formed Alliance military had decided that training their personnel, especially their special forces personnel likely to be engaged in high stress missions, to control their emotional responses and stress levels was as important as conditioning their bodies. Amanda didn’t try and stop her thoughts, only focused on her breaths, letting her mind calm, re-engaging her focus on the things she could control at the moment instead of expending energy and time on those she couldn’t control at the moment. At the moment, Shepard opened her eyes as she reminded herself, only at the moment.

She was having to do this more and more though, and though she had an appointment with Dr. Chakwas later today to discuss her issues with helmets and claustrophobia she wouldn’t bring this up with the doctor. Not on this ship, not when she would bet that the medbay and the doctor’s medical records were both being monitored and examined for information. Shepard shook her head, reminding herself to focus on the things she could do now…and hopefully one of those was finding something in the Cipher. Ok, another tactic then, the special forces marine thought with focusing exhale of breath, what biotic abilities had she seen or read about that would give her such an edge? She frowned in thought, what was that asari close combat martial art? The one that combined defensive barriers with biotically enhanced strikes? She had seen videos of it being performed by
asari commandos and been very impressed by what could be accomplished by it, and also very concerned by the possibility of dealing with some ex-commando merc who knew the technique while on some mission out in the Terminus. Susano, she finally recalled, the fighting technique was called susano or unyielding frame.

Maybe with something more specific to focus on she might have better luck, thought Shepard as she concentrated on what she recalled of the technique. Besides a normal biotic barrier, practitioners of the martial art were able to create thicker barrier sections almost like tech armor that were able to mitigate close quarter combat damage. Defensively, enemy strikes were blocked by the barrier armor, while offensively the barriers were discharged with biotic strikes and blows that were capable of shattering armor…deep within Amanda’s temporal lobe memories within the Cipher triggered.

Thalion ducked underneath the blow, his biotics flowing through his body and assisting his movements, letting his student’s staff pass harmlessly over him. Turning and spinning he brought up his short staff in a graceful arc, and in a sweeping move neatly caught his student behind the back of the knees. Branwen’s legs buckled and the younger man fell back upon his rear.

He took a step back, “That would have been a deadly move with an ithil meril. You need to be more mindful of the flow of combat, and of the placement and likely actions of your opponent or opponents. As soon as I began my spin, you should have foreseen my action and moved to block my staff or withdrawn from range of my attack and then decided whether there was an opening to attack or prepared to defend yourself.” He watched as the young man rolled to his feet. “Your dedication to mastering your biotics and your studies into tactics are admirable Branwen. To become a master of battle however, you must take the time spar as often as possible with your fellow students. There is no other way to teach your mind and body how to sense and anticipate the flow of combat other than to engage in it. Seek to balance your training better between your studies and your sparring.

Branwen rose, clasp his long-fingered hands before him and bowed, “I will heed your wisdom, Dragahîr.”

Thalion inclined his head in approval, “Let us repeat each of our attacks and blocks from your attempted strike. This time be prepared to counter.”

The younger man nodded, “Yes, Dragahîr,” he acknowledged and then moved back a few paces his dark eyes intent and determined.

Thalion was pleased to see it, Branwen was a promising student. He believed the younger man would be ready to advance from Dragasen, Apprentice or Student, to Dragaran, Journeyman, in another year or so if Branwen applied himself as diligently to his combat practice as he already did to his biotic and scholarly studies.

As soon as Thalion was ready, Branwen swung his staff; once again the older prothean ducked underneath it and spun. Only this time instead of being unprepared for the counter-attack the younger man lifted his arm in a defensive block. There was a blue shimmer as he formed a focused mass effect field around his defensively raised arm. Even as he pulled his strike in preparation for being knocked back, Thalion was pleased at his student’s response. Withdrawing would have been easier and simpler, but Branwen had chosen to shield instead, an offensive defense and a difficult one to master as well. If the attacker was not prepared for it, a biotic shield gave the defender a very good opportunity for a follow-up attack. The shield was a combination of a focused and hardened barrier and a timed biotic push pulse. It took a great deal of skill and practice to master both of the biotic skills involved as well as the correct timing of the biotic push pulse.
Thalion’s short staff struck the biotic shield and was forcefully repulsed back towards him; this was why a shield frequently gave the defender an opportunity to attack. Expecting it, Thalion simply took two steps backward, controlling his retreat and keeping his guard up, instead of letting it knock him off his feet or off balance. “Very good,” he praised Branwen as the younger male straightened, “with a full-strength pulse you might have still had an opening to exploit on a counter-attack.”

The younger man was the last of today’s students to spar with him; it was time to move on to other lessons. “Branwen, Mirima please get out the practice balls,” he motioned toward the proper container at the end of the room which held the weighted and padded balls. “The rest of you form a line in the middle of the room,” he instructed. He turned towards the two students he had asked to get out the practice balls and held up his hands. Mirima noticed and instead of tossing the ball in her hands to one of the other students she threw it to him.

Thalion caught it and then waited until each of the students had a ball as well and Branwen and Mirima joined them in the center of the hall. “This exercise is familiar to all of you,” he started by saying. “Use your biotics to lift,” he looked over at the ball and with a slight gesture of his hand formed a mass effect field around it that lightened its mass and lifted it into the air. “Then throw the practice ball,” a sweep of his hand sent the ball flying toward the far wall. Immediately he reached out and formed another field, “Then use pull to bring it back to you before it reaches the far wall,” he suited actions to words and the ball came back towards him. He leaned forward raising his arm and formed a focused biotic barrier around it, “Shield,” he watched the ball closely as it came towards him and then with perfect timing as it impacted the shield pushed against it in a pulse. “Repulse it back toward the wall in front of you,” he said as soon as he was done. He reached out his hand and, “pull,” he suited words to actions and then, “evade stepping out of the way of the ball,” he smoothly stepped back allowing the ball to pass by him this time. Again he reached out with his biotics, “Pull again,” he brought up his arm and formed another shield, “this time shield and pulse only enough to stop the balls momentum,” a slight push and when the ball impacted against the shield it bounced back about two feet and dropped to the floor. He looked at his students, “Then begin the cycle again as soon as you are ready.”

He stood back and watched as his students began the exercise, watching them closely and noting where they needed more training. He noticed some of the less experienced student’s balls were bouncing off the walls instead of being pulled back before they reached it. That wasn’t surprising, the most difficult part of this exercise was the constant concentration needed to form so many different types of mass effect fields within seconds of one another. He noted who they were and simply continued watching for now, after several decades of teaching he knew that most would improve with further practice. A few might need further training in maintaining their battle focus. There were three or four who, though they were competent warriors, would be never move beyond their current initiate status of Dragasen. He could already tell they simply didn’t have the discipline and focus necessary to obtain the proficiency in combat, biotics and tactics required to become Dragaran of the Order of Varnor, much less obtain the rank of Dragahîr. For their own sake, it was best that they come to that realization now, instead of after they wasted decades of both their lives and his.

He frowned as he noticed that some of the students were forming noticeable mass effect fields. The balls were light and not moving fast. At most he should see a slight ripple in the air and the bluish white glow as they shielded, and not the display of biotic energy that a few of them were making. “Halt,” he called out firmly, and waited as the students either caught the balls or let them drop to the floor and then turned to face him. “As you are already aware, creating mass effect fields takes energy from you. Always create the least field necessary to achieve the effect you desire. During a battle you never know what may happen, how long you may need to fight or what may occur that
will cause you to need to create one last mass effect field to save your life or the life of another. Always be mindful of conserving your energy, both biotic and of the body, you may have vital need of them later.”

“Yes, Dragahîr,” they raggedly chorused when it became clear he had finished speaking. Those to whom his speech was especially addressed looked embarrassed; they were aware of what had prompted it.

That one principle had saved his life more than once. Most citizens who lived on the core worlds of the Empire were unaware of how dangerous and lawless it could be on the fringes of Edhel space. There were always those who chose to walk an honorless path. Such people naturally gravitated to such places and took up criminal activities such as piracy and smuggling illegal goods and substances. There were even those who had fallen so far into dishonor and evil that they would trade in the lives of their fellow Edhilr. He still remembered his first encounter with slavery. He had been very young, only thirty-seven, and the idea that there were Edhil who were so completely without honor that they would sell and trade other Edhilr as if they were merely things had been almost more than he could take in.

He glanced up at the timepiece hung on the wall and motioned with his hand, “Continue with your practice,” he instructed them. They had about forty more hanté in this training session. When the training session was over, the students quickly dispersed to their respective bathing halls to clean up before leaving for either their homes or the dormitories provided for off-world students.

On the way out of the Order’s training facility, Thalion stopped by the statues of the god Thalion and his twin sister the goddess Callionel, the Protectors of the Empire which stood on either side of entry hall. Unlike the seated statues of the Inusannon which were popular in the public gardens, these statues depicted Edhil in their prime. They stood tall and proud in their armor, with their ithil meril, or moon swords, held upright in their gauntleted hands. The blades of the twin’s weapons, made from the cold light of the home world’s moons, were stylistically represented with artificially grown crystals that were lit with a chill greenish-white light.

Thalion had been named after the God, and in many ways, he found it fitting that he had joined the Order of Varnor, the Order of the Protectors of the Empire, and eventually proven himself worthy of the title Dragahîr, or Battlemaster. He bowed low to each and then proceeded out of the hall, if he tarried any longer his wife, Adanessa, would have to wait dinner on him and he had promised his daughter Alassiel that he would help her with her schoolwork tonight.

The next instance when Thalion looked up he was no longer walking through the middle of the Vendun Educational Complex but standing in the middle of a room. Someone’s sleeping room, he realized, noticing the sleeping platform. Where was he and how had he arrived here, thought the battlemaster as his eyes narrowed with wary anger. Examining the room, his gaze was drawn to a picture on the wall, an ancient ruin upon a hilltop at dusk lit by floodlights. It seemed strangely familiar to him and he stepped closer to examine it. It was the Parthenon at the summit of the Acropolis of Athens Greece; Temple Of Athena Nike, Goddess Of Victory in War and Wisdom.

Amanda’s mind snapped back to her own identity, leaving her staring at the picture’s familiar architecture as she struggled to comprehend all of the information she had just discovered from the Cipher. She had certainly found what she needed and more, Amanda mused in wonderment, and not just of a new biotic technique, but also about prothean culture and their religious beliefs. She thought of the swords she had seen in the hands of the statues, the way the blades were lit with an inner greenish light…and then registered something she should have realized before now. Her biotics were indigo, blue and white, while prothean biotics were dark green, green and white. None
of the races had green biotics in this cycle. Was it just something unique to protheans, or was it something unusual in their biotic amps that made the color of the mass effect fields different?

Shepard pondered the question for a moment, but no reason for such a difference came to mind and she shelved the oddity for the moment. The biotic skill Thalion and Branwen had been practicing had been intermediate level training in Thelrhaw, or the resolute body. Which seemed surprisingly very like what she recalled of Susano, Shepard frowned, even the names when you translated them meant about the same thing. She shook her head, how strange that two species so far apart in time would develop almost the exact same biotic martial arts style. Maybe it was just that you could only combine biotics with close combat fighting in so many ways.

Going back to what she had just learned though, that training class in Thelrhaw had been for the upper end of beginner’s level training for the skill, and the training itself was only open to skilled biotics. Honestly, Shepard knew she would not have met the qualifications for the class before her death, she had just not made perfecting her biotics that much of a priority in her life. The only reason she was able to do so now was because the Cipher was allowing her to cheat, bypassing the normal learning process to simply gain the skill without decades of training, and what Miranda had done to her biotics made her powerful enough to perform them. Though she normally didn’t like cheaters, she wasn’t really in any position to refuse to use her ill-gotten skills. Were they really ill gotten though? Shepard scrunched up her face, the situation defied reality. In any case, she would be stupid not to use these skills and certainly had already used them and wasn’t going to quit using them so…

Thalion’s skill level far surpassed that of his students, which meant that, just as she had hoped, she now had something she could use against another biotic as well as a surprise for a charging krogan. Hopefully it would be enough to tip the scales of any encounter in her favor. In the meantime, she had the time to practice some of the skills she had learned from Thalion’s memories…the Dragahîr, the Battlemaster of an Order of Protectors of the Empire. So, he was rather like a knight, Amanda smiled, bemused at the idea, but charmed by it as well.

She shook her head, practice. She focused, forming the correct barrier field for the exercise, and moved into the first stance which was simply a basic defensive stance. Then shifting forward, she brought up her forearm in a block, forming a defensive shield around it…

Forty minutes later, Amanda paused once again by the picture of the Parthenon, staring at it, recalling her youth when she had felt this severed and adrift once before.

Σβήστε τον νεοαφιχθέντα Athena, αξεπέραστο στην σοφία, προσεύχο µαι για σας.
(Clear-eyed Athena, unrivaled in wisdom, I pray to you.)

Σε καιρό πολέµου δεν έχετε ίση σε τακτικές ή της στρατηγικής.
(In time of war you have no equal in tactics or in strategy:)

Στην εποχή της ειρήνης είστε Βασιλεύως Βασιλευόντων και κατανόηση.
(In time of peace you are the mistress of reason and understanding.)

Σύμβουλος των τοπικών αρχόντων, προστάτης της clever ήρωες και τολµηρή χιλιαρή τυχοδιώκτες, υπερασπιστή του στοχαστή.
(Advisor of rulers, patron of clever heroes and bold-hearted adventurers, defender of the thinker;)
Goddess (Goddess to whom a strong arm and a sharp sword are nothing without the sense to wield them well, and the insight to know when words are worth more than weapons.)

Athena (Athena, grant me a sound mind and steady temper,)

(bless me with good judgment, show me the long view.)

Amanda quietly spoke the blessing which her grandmother, Alexandria Athene Shepard, had taught her as a teenager, and which her grandmother had learned from her mother, Calista Athene Mitsotakis. She could definitely use some of the Goddess’s wisdom, judgment and long view right now. Though these days she would call herself more of a deist than anything else; still, when she thought of the Creator of the Universe, that being had Athene’s form. She still remembered… Amanda snorted…ok, she remembered really well now, her father telling her what her middle name meant and why she had been given it. Her father’s side of the family came from a long line of dedicated followers of Athene or Athena. It was tradition to name any daughter born with light-colored, or glaukopis, eyes after the Goddess; for the child was believed to be touched by Athena herself, claimed, even before birth, as one of her followers.

Directly after the attack on Mindoir, after deciding that she was no longer going to be a dancer or singer, but a soldier so she could protect others from losing their own parents, teachers and friends… she had fervently embraced the idea of following that part of her Greek heritage. She had gone with her grandmother to Athens to meet her father’s relatives, the Mitsotakis and Kanellis families of Crete and Rhodes. She had learned more of her father’s family history and more about the wise warrior goddess that stood between civilization and any who would seek to destroy it. With where she had been mentally at the time, after witnessing the batarian slavers destroy her family and the entire colony, that had spoken to her on so many levels. The Kanellis lands on the island of Rhodes encompassed a grotto high up on a hill which bore ancient gnarled olive trees and looked out over the sea. Within the grotto’s shelter was an ancient statue of Athene. Dressed as a warrior, the goddess was clad in armor and carried her spear and shield. Her owl was carved nearby, resting on a stone tree branch. She had made a habit of going up there every day to visit it the entire time she was on the island, and near the end of her time there she made her decision. Accompanied by a gathering of her female relatives, many of whom also bore the middle name of Athene - Amanda had never seen so many silver eyed women in her live before - she had knelt before the statue, swore herself to the ideals of the Goddess and been anointed with olive oil; becoming the latest in a very long matriarchal line of followers to serve the ancient goddess.

A chime from near the doorway draw her attention away from the picture of the Parthenon. It was EDI, they had agreed to this after Shepard had snapped at the AI over simply activating the console and ‘showing up’ as it were without notice or invitation. This was now the AI’s equivalent of requesting admittance at her doorway. A compromise reached after Shepard had apologized for her display of temper and then explained what had triggered it. She waved her omni-tool, activating the console and waited until the holographic blue globe appeared, “Yes EDI?”

“Miranda, Jacob and Jack have all indicated that they are free at the moment should you wish to conduct a biotic training class,” the AI informed her.

One dark brow rose, interesting and hopefully promising of something other than another spat between the two women, “Very well, please tell them I’ll be down in a moment EDI, and thank you for the message.”
“You are welcome Shepard, EDI out,” the blue globe disappeared and Shepard turned away from the picture to head toward the door.
7 Days Post-Awakening: MSV Menrva, Deck 5, Hanger Bay

Barriers, as she waited for the elevator to take her down to Deck 5, the Hanger Deck, Shepard considered how exactly to start training her three students. Lindariel’s memories gave her a good place to start with the exercises she had taught Service Recruit Ethian to help him with controlling his órë. Then the specifics she had learned from the musician and then even more just now from Thalion’s memories.

Jack and Miranda were waiting for her in the hanger bay, hanging around the refitted sleek-looking asari shuttle that had been painted in non-descript boring grey paint. The two women stood several feet apart from one another and Shepard stopped as far away from them as they were from each other. Jacob was not immediately anywhere to be seen, but then appeared from around the other side of the shuttle to stand beside Miranda.

“So, beginning Prothean barrier training. Jacob if you would go stand over there please,” she indicated a spot to her left as she moved right so that now the four of them formed a squarish circle. “Jack I want you to close your eyes and then tell me when you feel Miranda, Jacob and I enter your biotic field, then we will return to these positions and repeat the process for each one of us.”

“What?” Jack snarled at her, and from the look on Miranda’s face the tattooed woman was simply the first to speak rather than the only one questioning her. Jacob looked puzzled, but at least willing to go along.

“You three wanted to learn prothean style barriers. This is where we are starting,” Shepard commented. Then she simply waited, meeting Jack’s angry brown-eyed gaze with studied patience.

“Fine,” the convict ground out when it became clear the Commander wasn’t about to change her mind and closed her eyes. Shepard began walking forward; this was something every biotic could do, feel when another biotic entered their aura. Even with no training in controlling your aura it… itched or tingled when you got too close to them. She deliberately did not approach as quickly as
Miranda or Jacob, wanting to see if Jack could discern between the different biotics coming within her personal range. “Yes,” snapped out Jack as Miranda closed to a little over a meter from her, turning her head in the dark-haired woman’s direction and then whipping her head around a moment later as she felt Jacob, “There.” Then finally, “There,” the convict opened her eyes and looked triumphantly at Shepard.

“Very good,” Amanda acknowledged and then glanced over at Miranda and Jacob, “let’s return to our staring positions and it will be Miranda’s turn then mine.” They repeated the process, with Miranda sensing them at approximately the same distance as Jack at two meters, and then Jacob at a slightly closer distance of one and a half meters. Then it was Shepard’s turn, and she planned on cheating. Closing her eyes Amanda focused on her aura and consciously expanded it seeking out the other two women she knew were approaching her. “Miranda,” she snapped her head in the biotics direction as she sensed the Cerberus operative’s characteristic field. She ignored the dark-haired woman’s quiet gasp of surprise in favor of maintaining her focus…there, “Jack” she snapped her head around as the felt the convict. She waited for two seconds more, then, “Jacob.” She opened her pale eyes and met his dark ones; they were standing about four meters away from her, double the distance from where they had detected someone entering their own biotic fields.

“How did you do that,” both Miranda and Jack almost comically echoed each other and then followed it up with a mutual glare at one another. Jacob lifted one hand to his mouth over to the side, smothering an amused smile. No one accused her of cheating; for the fact was if she could feel them, then they could feel her as well.

Shepard just managed to not grin, though it wasn’t easy. “I extended my biotic aura,” she responded to the question.

Both women frowned as they stared closer at her while Jacob looked at her quizzically. “But I don’t sense you using your biotics?” Miranda finally questioned as Jacob nodded in agreement with her.

“That’s because I didn’t,” Shepard responded, “I only extended my aura which isn’t quite the same as forming a dark energy field.”

“I didn't know there was a difference,” Jacob commented, crossing his arms across his chest.

Miranda added after a moment’s thought, “Everyone has a slight electric field around them, the electrical fields of biotics are just stronger because of the element zero in their bodies.”

“But what use is that?” Jack cut to the chase after glancing back and forth between them.

“There is a difference and it is very useful,” Shepard paused, then went ahead and added, “you saw its usefulness on Purgatory. Without being able to consciously control and sense though my aura, I could not have manifested the barrier fields I created or manipulated the different types of fields that I did within seconds of one another.” She paused for a second to order her thoughts, and decide what she was going to explain first. “We can sense our own dark energy fields when we form them and hold them. When I was trained, my trainers used a device to monitor our dark energy fields to help with forming them correctly and then to strengthen them.” All three biotics nodded, Miranda and Jacob looking thoughtful while Jack scowled as if whatever memory she was recalling was not a pleasant one. “Gaining the ability sense the dark energy fields your creating though your aura is like being given your own personal and portable dark energy monitor.”

“That…sounds intriguing,” Miranda said, her tone thoughtful, “but how did the Protheans teach such a skill?”

“The Protheans were similar to the Asari in that they could touch and share memories and
experiences,” Shepard explained, “so initially they would teach their children that way, but then they
taught them exercises to hone their abilities.”

“So, you’re telling us that these are children’s lessons?” Jack snarked with crossed arms.

Shepard grinned, “Essentially, yes, though these have been modified for non-Protheans.” She
suspected it was time to reinforce her lie about how she knew such things she added, “Which I
suspect, is why they ended up as one of the messages stored in the beacon. From what I can tell these
are lessons for non-Protheans intending on finding employment in the Prothean government, and
such skills were required in order to manipulate Prothean data devices and communications
equipment.”

“It was theorized that was the case,” Miranda commented, “but every Prothean device found so far
was either activated and apparently set to react to anyone coming within a certain range, such as the
beacon on Eden Prime, or deactivated and its security protocols had to be defeated in order to
manually activate it.”

Shepard nodded, “Well I’d say these lessons definitely indicate that you needed to be a biotic in
order to interact with them.” Thanks to Lindariel’s memories she knew exactly how to activate the
devices, but wasn’t about to share anything more than the hint that it might have something to do
with biotic auras with the Cerberus operative.

“Yea, yea boring,” Jack interrupted them, “what are these children’s lessons anyway? Gotta be rather
simple and easy to learn huh Cheerleader?”

And just like that the competition between the two of them was on again, with Miranda glaring at
Jack and the convict looking smug and satisfied. Jacob, who had been listening to the conversation in
thoughtful silence, just shook his head at the two of them. Well if it spurred them on to learning
quickly, Shepard shrugged, “Alright then, the first lesson then is designed to increase your sensitivity
to your own aura…”

7 Days Post-Awakening: MSV Menrva, Deck 3, Medical Bay

Two hours later Shepard made her way to the ship’s third deck for her appointment with Dr.
Chakwas. Noting before she entered that the large windows were already shuttered so anyone in the
galley could not just look into the medical bay. “Shepard,” the grey-haired, green-eyed older woman
greeted her with a welcoming smile as she entered the medical bay, “how have you been feeling?”

Stressed, Shepard wanted to tell her, but instead commented with a shrug, “Alright I guess.”

That earned her one raised eyebrow from the doctor, “Indeed.” Chakwas’s gaze narrowed on the
still visible scarring along her cheek and she frowned, “That isn’t healing like it should, after our
discussion I’d like to take a look at it.”

Shepard reached up automatically toward her face, then stopped herself and lowered her hand back
to her side. She knew exactly what the doctor saw, the still raw scars and odd orange-hued bio-
synthetic material underneath in place of the muscle that used to be there before her death. She
honestly tried very hard not to look too much at herself in a mirror these days because of it. She
hadn’t thought of herself as being particularly vain before, but the reflected image that greeted her
every day with it’s obvious damage and still slight orange glowing pupils was a bit unsettling to look
at and think of as her face and her body. From the doctor’s statement though it sounded like she
should be healing faster than she was, so perhaps there was something the doctor could do to help, “Alright,” Shepard agreed.

Chakwas looked at her appraisingly for a moment longer, telling Amanda that her aborted movement had been seen and noted, before the older woman nodded. She motioned to where she had arranged two chairs within the u-shaped space of her desk and research bench, “Please sit.” She waited until they had both settled before speaking again, “So I am curious, given the changes the drell neurochemicals they used to preserve your memories, if you feel the issues you are having are exacerbated by those changes?”

Amanda leaned back in the chair as she considered the question, “I’d have to say yes, part of the issue is to not get caught up in the memory when I put on a helmet and hear the air exchange mechanism in my ear.”

The doctor nodded, “Have you thought about seeing if the sound the mechanism makes can be changed so it’s less of a trigger for you?”

Shepard looked at her startled, “That’s…a rather good idea,” she admitted thinking about it, “and I don’t think it would be that difficult at all to alter the sound without affecting the functioning of the helmet.” In fact, she already had a few ideas she wanted to run by Jacob to see how he thought they would work.

Chakwas nodded, “I also understand you received new Terminus manufactured armor. I’ve noticed before that their armor tends to have a larger face plate than most of the Alliance armors. Do you think that will help as well?”

The Commander smiled, “I do, plus its completely reflective, which gives the glass of the faceplate a slightly different look.”

“And the entire re-breather apparatus is enclosed within an armored shell,” Chakwas noted, “which means there is much less chance of any stray object damaging a breathing hose.” The older woman’s green eyes flashed with anger, but she only asked, “Do you think that will help you feel as if there is less chance of what happened before happening again?”

“Yes,” Shepard replied instantly, “even though I didn’t really consider it when I first broached the subject of obtaining them, the fact that the re-breather is enclosed does make me feel more comfortable with using them.”

“So, we have two environmental changes that should reduce the chance of your memories triggering and one cognitive one. Where do you want to be at the end of these sessions?”

More than familiar with cognitive behavioral therapy, Amanda considered her response for a few seconds before replying, “I want to put on my armor without having to push down thoughts of my death.”

“That’s all?” questioned the doctor, and at Shepard’s decisive answering nod she continued, “Well then let’s see what we can do to get there.”

Approximately an hour later they finished up the therapy session and Dr. Chakwas moved rather immediately onto discussing her physical health. “Now about the unhealed areas on your face and I assume the rest of your body?”
Amanda grimaced at the reminder, “Yes, they’re about the same everywhere.”

“Hmm, I suspect I know what this is,” the grey-haired woman moved closer as she examined the unhealed areas on Amanda’s face. “It’s usually stress related, a reaction between your skin and your cybernetic systems,” she explained. “It will eventually heal on its own, but the process would go quicker if you can reduce your stress and thus the amount of stress related hormones in your bloodstream affecting your body.”

Shepard huffed out a wry laugh, surrounded by inexperienced personnel and monitored constantly by a AI, “Yea, I’ll get right on that.”

“Commander,” the doctor frowned, “that response does not fill me with confidence.”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed that the crew is a bit short of combat experience,” Shepard scowled, “and the thought of being constantly monitored everywhere on this ship is not exactly conducive toward stress reduction.”

“I see,” Karin looked troubled, “I assume you mean that includes even the medical bay and my medical records?”

Shepard shot her a hard look, of course she meant exactly that.

8 Days Post-Awakening: Korlus

It was one thing to read about Korlus being a starship junkyard and another thing entirely to actually witness it from the planet’s surface. Miles and miles of stripped and purposefully crashed starships, some of them piled on top of one another. Looking up from where the team had landed though the hazy murk of the atmosphere you could see the systems G class star shining fitfully though the haze and clouds. Far above them a massive starship passed over, doubtless in the process of being stripped of everything that would bring a profit, and then fated to join the rest of its brethren on the planet’s surface.

A last-minute addition to her mission planning had netted them a supply of reconnaissance probes. Once on planet, EDI would control them remotely via her link with the shuttle which would drop them off at their mission landing zone and then remain nearby concealed by the bulk of a rusting freighter. Shepard had briefed the team assignments earlier on the Normandy, hopefully ensuring that everyone understood their combat role in the upcoming mission. With the addition of EDI controlling the reconnaissance probe, they now at least had aerial reconnaissance of the area. Which meant that she and Jack could focus more on being the forward team whose role was to make initial contact with the enemy to fix them in place, while Jacob and Miranda formed the trail team to either reinforce them or flank the enemy depending on how any combat situation developed. Shepard was fully aware that there would be times that EDI would not be able to scout for them, especially when they had to make their way through the interiors of the junked ships. In that case, she and Jack would have to take back on the role of scouting their route as well as being the forward team.

They had tentatively located Dr. Okeer’s lab well within the area controlled by the Ragar Kolo mercenary group. Shepard’s mission plan called for them to infiltrate the area as quietly and quickly as possible and only initiating combat if absolutely necessary. Once they reached Dr. Okeer’s lab they would make contact with the krogan, ascertain whether or not he was willing to work with them and then call for an extraction from that location. Shepard’s plan was to rely on stealth whenever possible, and speed when not in order to keep the mercenaries from determining their exact location.
Then be in and out of the lab and off planet before they could manage a coordinated response to stop them.

Shepard glanced up, her gaze searching for the reconnaissance probe, then spotted it overhead.
“EDI, do you detect anyone near our current location?” She queried over the team’s communication’s channel through the microphone embedded in her helmet.

“Yes, Shepard, there is a nearby checkpoint manned by three batarians and two krogan. Due to the flight path taken by the shuttle, they do not appear to be aware of your presence. I detect no other personnel in the immediate area other than those at the checkpoint. I must caution you however, that this probe’s scans cannot penetrate the materials of the starship hulls around you. Thus it is quite possible that there may be personnel within them that I cannot detect, either visually or by heat signatures,” the AI informed them.

“Understood,” Shepard acknowledged with a grimace. It wasn’t an ideal situation, but it was definitely better than not having any overhead reconnaissance. “Give us an updated tactical map of the area, lets mark out a concealed route past them.”

Five minutes later they had a tentative route marked out that should get them past the checkpoint to a location where they could scale up the side of the massive freighter to an opening. That route into the mercenary’s territory seemed to be unguarded, unlike the ground level entrance. Jack scowled at the idea of sneaking around them instead of attacking, but didn’t do anything other than make a few scathing comments.

“There’s only five of them, you and I could take them out easily,” Jack protested as the extent to which they would have to swing wide of the checkpoint became obvious.

“And alert the entire compound of approximately a hundred or so mercenaries, at least a quarter of which are krogan, to our presence,” quickly noted Shepard before Miranda could utter the scathing response that was so obviously forming given her expression. “We’re good, but I don’t like those types of odds and I really don’t want to be captured.” Jack scowled and rubbed her arm at that reminder and then shut up about avoiding the checkpoint.

Shepard had noticed that Jack seemed rather subdued after the team’s mandatory pre-mission meeting with Dr. Chakwas to discuss the Final Choice injections, colloquially known as the Final Finger. About seven or so years after Mindoir and the start of the practice of batarian slavers using a chemical cocktail to lobotomize human slaves to make them permanently docile; an enterprising drug company, Manzo Pharmaceuticals, designed a slow release drug that was normally inert in the body, but when combined with the chemicals the batarians used turned into a deadly toxin. The drug was injected as micro pellets into the thick muscles of the legs and arms in several different locations to make it difficult to find and remove and lasted for almost a month before dissolving completely and being processed out of the body. During that time however, if you were captured and processed as a batarian slave, you were assured that at least you would not remain one for very long. She and Jacob were both used to getting the shots, but both Miranda and Jack had seemed a bit disconcerted during the mandatory briefing about the drug. After Shepard brought up the fact that slavery was entirely legal on Korlus so if they were captured they would be immediately processed and then put up for sale however, they hadn’t opted out of getting the shots.

“Alright, let’s move out,” she turned to her team. “Miranda, Jacob, let Jack and I get past the checkpoint first, then you two follow us. Past that lets keep at least 30 meters in between the two teams while we’re moving.”
Miranda and Jacob, her in her new black and dark blue armor and him in his dark grey and maroon armor, both nodded. “Understood commander,” Miranda replied.

It took them about thirty minutes of crouching, running, and in one place low crawling alongside some rusting scrap metal to skirt their way around the mercenaries’ checkpoint without being seen. While they were waiting for Miranda and Jacob to do the same, Shepard planned out the next phase of their path. There was a rectangular opening in the side of the freighter, probably where cargo had been loaded onto the ship. Fortunately, the freighter had crashed with the topside of the ship upright, so she didn't have to figure out how they would move though the ship with everything upside down, including the stairwells. “EDI the opening into the ship,” she knew the reconnaissance drone had line of sight on the opening as well as observing Miranda and Jacob’s progress, “can you detect anyone on watch up there? And what exactly are we going into when we get there?”

“No, Commander I cannot detect anyone immediately inside the opening or within what appears to be a cargo bay. The bay is 35.8 meters wide by 15.8 meters deep. There are four bay doors leading from the area, two on either side and two at the rear of the bay.”

“Thank you, EDI,” she acknowledged then pulled the grappling gun from her back and began running a sync check to make sure it was properly synced with her armor’s VI interface. With it synced, the grappling gun could make use of the armor’s more sophisticated targeting system.

“We’re though Commander,” Miranda announced fifteen minutes later.

“Good,” Shepard acknowledged as she aimed for just above the opening and then waited for the weapon’s targeting system to determine how much thrust would be needed to reach it. A moment later, a targeting reticule was projected onto the inside of her helmet indicating that she needed to adjust her aiming of the weapon for it to reach the targeted location. She adjusted it and then braced herself as the reticule went red and the weapon fired. The magnetic grappling disk shot upward, arched and then fell toward the side of the freighter with its thin monofilament line towing behind it. A fraction of a second later its magnetic field snapped it against the freighter’s metallic hull with a muted clank exactly where Shepard had been aiming.

Shepard made a grunt of satisfaction, “Alright Jack let me hook us both up to the line. Then I’ll ascend first and keep watch while you come up, and then it will be Jacob and Miranda’s turn.”

When Jack approached her Shepard immediately noticed that the tattooed woman was not maintaining her barrier by the feel of the other woman within her aura. “Jack, you might want to try keeping your barrier up at all times, the shields in that armor are pretty good but they won’t stop a sniper’s bullet.” Though Shepard couldn’t see though the other woman’s polarized faceplate she could almost sense the sneer on Jack’s face just from her stance. “Also, keeping your barrier up has the side effect of extending your aura and you can use it help you sense your immediate environment. I’m keeping mine extended at the moment just for that reason, granted it only extends out around two meters, but at least I can sense anything within that radius, even someone coming up from behind me.”

“That might have even kept you from being captured Jack,” Miranda chose that moment to join the conversation, her tone superficially helpful, “from what Agent Rasa said you were so focused on killing them that you didn’t even hear a krogan coming up behind you.”

“Fuck you, Cheerleader!” Jack snarled in reply.

“Enough, you two,” Shepard snapped at both of them before they could escalate the argument
further, “let’s keep our attention on the mission, because we really don’t want to reenact that scene here.”

“Give me that damn line then,” Jack snapped at her, “let’s find this krogan your looking for, and get out of this slaver pit.”

Shepard stared at the convict and snapped her órë in a single ripple of power rebukingly, eliciting a startled noise from the woman, before doing as Jack asked and handing over the line. She made it to the opening in the side of the freighter without incident, pulling herself up to the edge and then cautiously looking inside. It was definitely a cargo bay, she decided seeing the industrial wide doors and empty racks spaced around the edges of the area. As EDI had indicated, there was no sign of anyone within the area. Lifting her arm, she activated her omni-tool and ran a quick scan for any signs of monitoring or electronic signaling beyond what they had already detected. There were none, and so she indicated to Jack that the way was clear for her to make her own ascent.

Once both teams were up, Shepard and Jack made their way father inside the gutted ship. Fortunately, freighters unusually had cargo bays on either side to facilitate loading and unloading. Thus, the two of them went through the wide gaping entrance at the far end of the bay, and simply followed the wide corridor though the center of the ship out to the other side. Shepard halted well back from the opening, well aware that they would be visible to anyone keeping watch from the ground or from within one of the other crashed ships that walled in the Ragar Kolo mercenary’s territory. “EDI did you find a good position?” she and the AI had discussed tactics on keeping the reconnaissance probe out of sight while EDI was scouting for them while onboard the Menrva. The last thing Shepard wanted was for their infiltration to be discovered due to someone looking up and noticing the probe in the sky obviously spying on them.

“Yes Shepard,” the AI responded, “I am concealed within the superstructure of the ship thirty degrees from your current location within an opening left by the removal of the ships LADAR system.”

“Good,” the Commander responded, “give me a report please.”

“Establishing a link updating your tactical map now,” EDI announced just before the tactical omni-tool embedded into her armor’s vambrace scrolled the same message across its display. Shepard activated it, pulling up a topographical display of the updated map. “You are now entering the outskirts area of the Ragar Kolo’s camp. Currently I have discovered five patrols and three lookouts guarding the area you are about to enter.” Each patrol and lookout highlighted on the topographical map, along with their current real-time location and projected patrol route. “Might I suggest the following route to avoid detection,” EDI helpfully added as the aforementioned route displayed on the map.

Shepard began moving the display around, looking at it from various angles and elevations, seeing exactly why the AI had chosen this exact route. It offered concealment from the lookouts as well as avoiding most of the patrols. With careful timing and attention, they should be able to make it through the area without being detected. “Well done, EDI,” she praised, “keeps us out of sight and with a bit of timing we’ll easily avoid the patrols.”

“Thank you, Commander,” the AI responded. “I will remain at this location until both teams have successfully descended without detection and then shift position to this location,” another spot lit on the map about half way between their current location and where they hoped Okeer’s lab was located, “from there I will be able to monitor any alterations in the enemy’s patrol routes as well as beginning my reconnaissance of the area you will be moving into next.”
“Acknowledged,” Shepard responded as she lowered herself onto the floor and began crawling forward to the opening. EDI was good but there was no reason at all for her not to do her own reconnaissance of the area before descending from the ship. Reaching back for the binoculars magnetized to the right rear of her utility belt she pulled them loose and then extended them before looking through them. Using her memory of the tactical map as a guide it didn’t take her long to locate the five patrols of five or six batarians with the occasional krogan and the three batarian lookouts. She then focused her attention on looking over their proposed route. Only when she was satisfied did she put the binoculars away and then pull out the grappling gun. It was still synced, only this time she was firing it at the cargo bay ceiling. Shepard was painfully aware of how exposed she potentially was to approximately forty eyes as she descended from the cargo bay opening, yet the entire team made it to the ground without any evidence that the mercenaries had noticed the four of them.

As she crawled through yet another muddy spot of ground, Shepard distractedly thought of how much work it was going to be to clean their armor once they were back on the Menrva, she must have polluted sludge ground into every crevice of the armor plating. “Hold here,” she ordered Jack behind her as she crawled to the edge of the broken piece of hull they were using as cover and queried EDI for another update. The last thing she wanted to do was to stick her head out exactly when the expected patrol was going past. Especially when it was unnecessary due to the aerial reconnaissance probe EDI was controlling.

“In thirty seconds the patrol in your immediate area will be past your current position,” the AI informed them.

“Roger that,” Shepard commented and then marked the time. When thirty seconds were up, she and Jack continued on their way. They were already an hour into the ops and still had almost an hour to go before they reached the suspected site of Okeer’s lab. That was, of course, provided there were no issues getting there and that they were correct in their identification of his location.

It was almost as if she had summoned Murphy with her last thought Shepard mused as EDI unexpectedly announced, “Shepard, forty minutes ago five Blood Pack ships exited the relay and headed toward Korlus. I did not mention this at the time as records indicate it is not unusual for the Blood Pack to do business on Korlus. However, ten minutes ago five troop transports lifted off from those ships. Given their current heading this area is within the range of their possible destinations.”

Shepard frowned as she continued her crouched movement alongside one of the smaller stripped ships, a merchant vessel possibly, “If this is their destination how long until they arrive?”

“Twenty-two minutes,” EDI responded, “I will continue analyzing their flight path and will inform you if they continue toward the Ragar Kolo camp.”

“Give me five-minute updates EDI,” Shepard replied as she continued forward, “let’s assume the worse until we know for certain they aren’t headed in this direction.”

“Commander,” Miranda entered the conversation, “the Blood Pack might be interested in Okeer due to his activities with the Collectors, the same as we are. The dossier did mention that he might be working on a cure for the genophage.”

“Yea,” Amanda grimly replied, “that had occurred to me as well.” Shepard grimaced as she paused toward the stern of the wrecked transport, this mission suddenly had the possibility of going pear-shaped rather rapidly if the Blood Pack was as interested as they were in reaching Okeer. “Carefully
and deliberately everyone,” she commented, “but let’s try and pick up the pace since we might now be on a deadline to reach Okeer.” Suiting her words to her actions, Shepard spared a glance at her topographical display which EDI was continuously updating in real time as she spotted additional hostiles. It was clear and the lookouts had obstructed lines of sight to this area. Still though she took care to stay in a crouched run as she made her way to the next piece of cover, a pile of shuttles that were more stripped shells than anything else.

“Does that mean we can stop all this sneaking around?” Jack groused as she got read to make the same run across the open space, “and start killing these slavers? Don’t tell me you don’t want to.”

Shepard shook her head in exasperation from where she kept watch on the other side, “If we had more people you’d have a chance of persuading me, but honestly I want us to complete this mission with the least risk of capture by these slavers more than I want to kill them.” Jack only snorted in reply, but Shepard noticed that the convict kept as low a profile as possible as she made her way over to where Shepard waited beside the junked shuttles. The possibility of being a lobotomized dimwitted and docile pleasure slave for batarians to enjoy raping was a definite dampener on Jack’s idea of fun, only alleviated by the thought they would at least experience only a short while of such a fate before the Final Finger ended it.

The Blood Pack transports were still possibly headed toward the Ragar Kalo camp at the five, ten and fifteen-minute updates from EDI. Shepard knew that Joker had already selected the most favorable orbit around Korlus possible just in case they needed backup beyond the shuttle, and the shuttle was currently at the closest concealed site to the suspected location of Okeer’s laboratory. There was really nothing else she could do to prepare for the possibility that the Blood Pack was headed here than she had already done during their mission planning. The only way she could raise their odds was to be as close to Okeer’s lab as possible when the other mercenary group arrived and Shepard was already moving as quickly as she felt they could without alerting the Ragar Kalo of their presence in the camp.

“Shepard,” EDI broadcast a minute later, “the Ragar Kalo have just sent out an alert about the approaching Blood Pack transports.” Well that seemed to nix the idea that it might be a friendly visit, thought Shepard, which might or might not work to their favor. She wasn’t sure being in the middle of a brawl between two mercenary groups when both had krogan and one was likely adding vorcha to the mix was a good idea, but if the battle drew the Ragar Kalo to one area they might be able to get around quicker…provided that area was not the Blood Pack’s destination. Approximately five minutes later, just as they were about to enter what looked as if it had once been a large merchant ship to make their way through what remained of its interior, EDI announced that the Blood Pack transports were definitely headed toward the camp and in addition appeared to specifically be heading to the same area of the camp as the team. Shepard was now almost certain they were correct and Warlord Okeer’s laboratory was indeed located within the relatively intact freighter.

“This is going to be problem,” Miranda commented.

To which Jack responded sarcastically, “You think?”

Jacob ignored both of them, “Since both groups will be converging there should we just let them fight it out some? Hope it thins their numbers?”

“That’s exactly what I was considering,” Shepard replied to him, “it’s not ideal, but since the Blood Pack seems to be headed to the same location we are that’s probably our best choice. We just need to hope they don’t either kill or take Okeer with them before we have a chance to talk to him. Miranda, how important is Okeer to the team? Is he worth us engaging with both or either
mercenary group on the chance that he might be willing to join us or at least share useful information about the Collectors?"

“The Illusive Man thought he was important enough to include him in the first two dossiers,” she responded somewhat unhelpfully, “but he’s not worth us risking the entire team to recruit.”

The last reminder was actually helpful, “Alright, slight change of plan then, we should be able to observe the Blood Pack landing from the upper decks of this freighter. Let’s head upward and look for the port side cargo bay, once the Ragar Kalo are engaged with the Blood Pack we will just rappel down the side. The freighter had a similar layout to the first one they encountered, so Shepard headed first for the midships stairwell and then went up two decks where she estimated the cargo bays should be located.

“Shepard,” EDI announced as they left the stairwell, “I have just identified a batarian sniper team setting up in the cargo bay which is your intended destination. I would advise eliminating the five of them before proceeding further as they would be easily able to observe the team moving toward the target location from their position.”

“Finally, some action,” Jack noted with delight, “how do you want to take them out?”

“We can’t let them communicate our presence, so we’re going to wait until the fighting begins and we have some covering noise then lead with a grenade set to detonate on impact. Sorry Jack,” Shepard apologized to the other biotic. “If it’s any consolation, I’m sure we will end up having to battle our way through whatever remains of both the Ragar Kalo and Blood Pack to get to Okeer.” That was of course provided she thought they could do so without too much risk of getting captured, thought Shepard, but no reason to point that out at this time.

Jack’s helmeted head swing her way, “You really like your grenades don’t you,” the biotic observed.

“They make a statement,” Shepard observed dryly, “a messy one mind you, but definitely a statement.”

“Sound of the grenade’s going to echo like crazy in that bay,” observed Jacob, “unless their making a lot of noise outside they might notice it.”

“Or notice that their sniper team’s dead,” commented Miranda.

Shepard nodded, “I suspect with the Blood Pack we won’t have to worry about them being too quiet, and yes I’m sure they will notice their sniper team being taken out. The trick is to make sure they don’t know who did it. Which is why after their dead we’re now not going to rappel from that location, but go back down to the ground level and out. If their monitoring their vitals, they would start looking in this direction very quickly and notice us hanging from the side of the ship.”

The Ragar Kalo sniper team setup in the freighter’s cargo bay was comprised of three batarian mercenaries with sniper rifles and two spotters for them that knelt on either side with binoculars glued to their eyes. None of them paid any attention to what might be going on behind them, a fatal error, thought Shepard who was carefully observing them from the shadowed entryway. A few minutes later, the Blood Pack arrived and they didn’t disappoint her estimation of what they would do when they did, opening the battle with a deafening barrage of missiles fired from their five troop transports just before their landing to drop off a sizable attack force. Shepard, who had been waiting by the cargo bay entrance lost no time flash stepping into the bay to a spot about ten meters behind them with two grenades ready in her hand. She tossed them one after the other and both set to detonate upon impact.
at the tightly clustered sniper team then dropped to the deck. Rising after they both detonated she verified that none of the batarians were still alive. Surveying the bloody carnage left after both detonations, Shepard doubted they had even had any time to notice the grenades before they died from the resulting explosion.

Moving up to the opening in the ship both she and Jack observed the battle taking place below between the two mercenary groups. It was fierce, with the noise of rifles punctuated with the occasional louder retort of a shotgun among the bright splashes of flamethrower flame from the Blood Pack’s vorcha units. Shepard was quite happy not to be down there in the melee, for it seemed like both sides were doing an excellent job of trying to kill each other off in the quickest time possible. Just then Miranda and Jacob joined them and Shepard inquired of the AI, “EDI what do you have for me?”


“They must have been packed,” Jacob observed, interrupting the AI.

“Indeed,” EDI responded, “krogan transports are approximately twice the size of most shuttles, and normally carry up to ten krogan in each transport. In this case, they held five krogan and ten vorcha per transport. Also, I have made a tentative identification of the lead krogan. Shepard, I believe Warlord Garm, Overlord Ganar Wrang’s third in command is leading this attack upon the Ragar Kalo.”

“That will make things more difficult,” observed Miranda.

Shepard snorted, indeed it would, “Let’s get moving before anyone notices the four of us watching from up here and while their all occupied with each other.”

“Shepard,” EDI said, “I have calculated an alternate path now that the Ragar Kalo are fully engaged with the Blood Pack. While it is longer you should be able to move more openly along it, decreasing the amount of time it will take to reach the probable location of Warlord Okeer’s laboratory by fifteen minutes.”

That meant a travel time of only fifteen more minutes instead of thirty realized Shepard. “Sounds good to me,” she responded as she moved back in the direction from which they had come, “forward it to us.”
8 Days Post-Awakening: Korlus

It felt like a race Shepard thought as she made her way at a jog alongside the broken hull of some long derelict merchant ship, albeit one that thankfully the Blood Pack didn’t yet realize they were running, to reach Warlord Okeer first. They would soon have to slow down again however, as they were drawing near to where they would start needing to slip their way in between the areas where the two mercenary groups were currently battling against one another to reach the site of Okeer’s laboratory. That would be easier said than done she knew, especially since every successive glance at her tactical map, which EDI was keeping updated in real time, showed that the Ragar Kalo forces were being steadily pushed back towards the derelict freighter in question by the attacking Blood Pack.

That developing situation was exactly why they were currently jogging through this area instead of moving at a more cautious pace. Thankfully EDI’s suggested route was proving to be just as deserted as the AI had calculated, or they would not dare move though here so openly. Shepard knew they had to keep moving toward their objective, and given the current tactical environment that essentially meant they needed to remain undetected for as long as possible. She hadn’t exactly planned for this scenario, but the greatest risk she saw now was for them to be discovered by one or both groups and be pinned down by a much larger attacking force. They would probably have to retreat in that case to break contact, and that might cost them any chance of making contact with Okeer as she didn’t know what the Blood Pack’s plans were for him…provided he or his research was indeed their objective in the first place.

Due to the increasing risk of discovery, Shepard had asked EDI earlier to change her probe’s observation post to different location almost opposite of where it had been located. As each minute passed the possible routes they could take to slip between the different groups of mercenaries all steadily converging on their target steadily decreased and the amount of risk in making such an attempt steadily increased. She was hoping that with EDI’s help, and a new look on the matter - literally - she could find a different option for the team to enter the freighter than the original ground route. “EDI, how close are you to being in position?” she inquired of the AI as she slowed to a walk and the halted near the bow of the merchant ship currently providing she and Jack cover.

“I will be in position in one minute and forty-five seconds Shepard,” EDI replied.
“Alright we’ll just wait here then,” Shepard decided and dropped to a kneeling position to take a breather and suck down a mouthful or two of energy-gel. She had switched out the lemon-lime for berry-mix this time around and was finding the berry tasting sweet gooey gel marginally easier to tolerate.

Jack came up behind her and crouched down on one knee and Shepard turned her head when she felt the lack of something only to be interrupted in her lecture by the convict, “Yea, yea I know no barrier. I was getting a headache from holding it. How in the hell are you keeping yours up all this time?”

“Regular hits on the energy-gel, you should probably take a mouthful every thirty minutes or so when maintaining a combat barrier,” Shepard replied. Mind you she was currently being full of shit, Shepard thought to herself mirthfully, this was all of her second mission actually managing to maintain a barrier for the complete ops period and here she was sounding like a pro at it. Thalion’s lecturing in the back of her mind about irresponsibility and shirking of duty, he was really as bad as any turian about it she mused, as well as the knowledge that she would be giving Jack an excuse not to maintain her own barrier, both did a naggingly good job at reminding her to maintain her own.

“If you usually wore something more than a strap for armor, you might already know about this Jack,” Miranda chimed in with a saccharine sweet tone, “the dispenser is the second tube to the left.”

“Says the woman who usually walks around in a suit that’s so tight it’s giving you a wedgie, or do you just like how that feels?” Jack immediately snarled back.

Miranda snarled back, “How…”

“Enough you two,” Shepard interrupted the incipient argument even as her brow rose over the fact that apparently Jack had looked closely enough to notice. “Keep your focus on the mission,” she sternly reminded them even as she could swear she heard a chocked back laugh from Jacob.

“Shepard,” EDI thankfully broke into the conversation, “the probe is now in position. I am scanning the surrounding area and updating your tactical map with the desired information.”

“Thank you, EDI,” Shepard responded and then said to the others, “alright let’s see if we can find a backdoor into this place since the front yard has gotten so unexpectedly busy.”

“Don’t want to crash their party?” Jack snarked.

Shepard pulled up the newly updated tactical map. “Not until the party-goers ranks get thinned quite a bit more,” she responded with a wry smile which of course Jack couldn’t see due to the polarization of her helmet. She panned the map around taking a look at the route toward the rear of the crashed freighter. She knew what she was hoping to find, an entrance that wasn’t the target of the Blood Pack, wasn’t heavily guarded, and wasn’t in the line of sight of any of the remaining Ragar Kalolookouts still in place. Her grey eyes narrowed on the map and she zoomed in on a promising looking opening, then panned out adding in commands that drew line of sight arcs for the lookouts.

“Looks good,” Jacob commented as they could see what she was doing, “if we swing out we might even be able to get there quicker than going the most direct route which would bring us closer to the fighting.”
“Exactly what I was thinking,” Shepard commented as she started to map out the possible route she had identified and Jacob had commented upon. Ten minutes later, having taken the longer route, but able to move quicker due to the lowered risk of encountering either mercenary group, the two teams were drawing near their new objective which was an opening near the upper part of the freighter that was out of the way of the current fighting taking place around the other side of the crashed ship. “Miranda, Jacob,” she said as she highlighted an elevated location atop a crashed transport close by on the holographic tactical map, “move to this position and take up watch there while Jack and I make our ascent.”

“Understood, Commander,” Miranda acknowledged, “making our way there now.”

Shepard pulled her binoculars from her utility belt and began examine the side of the freighter closer, planning out the ascent as she waited for the other team to get into position. She knew this would be a multi-pitch climb to make it to nearly the top of the fifteen-deck high ship. Shepard lowered her binoculars and re-attached them to her belt once she was satisfied she had the ascent planned out. Miranda and Jacob had informed her they were in place a few minutes ago, “Alright, getting ready to begin our ascent now.” She reached over her shoulder and pulled the grappling gun free, checked that it was still synced and then targeted a spot on the hull about thirty meters up just above a walkway. This would be the first pitch on the ascent, from there they would use the walkway to make their way along to where they could make the second.

The higher they climbed the more Shepard had to fight against the instinct to tense up. She didn’t even dare maintain more than the slightest of barriers out of fear of betraying their presence, especially as it was now tending toward nightfall and the sun was setting though the hazy murk lighting the sky afire with reds and oranges. Finally, they made it to their objective. Shepard carefully pulled herself alongside the opening they were going to enter and carefully glanced inside the empty oval opening where there had once been a pressurized lock. EDI had already verified that the small room beyond, which had probably once been a maintenance airlock, appeared to be empty, but it never hurt to double check before just blithely stepping inside. Once she was inside she immediately moved to the next opening which led to another larger room with two doorways. “Jack, I’m going to keep watch here while you keep watch over the outer door as Miranda and Jack make the ascent.”

“Fine,” Jack sounded irritated, but at least didn’t argue with her.

“Starting our ascent now,” Miranda informed them, “Should we remove the lines as we come up or leave them?”

“Remove them,” Shepard responded after a moment of weighing the two options. Figuring the chances of them needing them was actually less than the possibility they would alert someone to their presence. Doubly so since everyone had their own emergency use personal rappel line with a magnetic lock they could use to descend up to 100 meters if needed, enough to just get them back to the ground.

Once all four of them were present, the two teams proceeded further into the freighter, winding their way to the midships stairwell and then cautiously heading down. Unfortunately, now that they were here, they had no intel at all on where exactly Okeer’s laboratory might be located within the freighter. Therefore, Shepard was passively scanning for any sign of electrical usage, reasoning that where there was a laboratory there was probably a noticeable electrical draw on the otherwise stripped ship. She first noticed a signal on her scanner when they descended to the seventh deck then on the sixth deck they came upon the source, a bundle of thick electrical cables snaking up the stairwell from below.
“Finally,” Jack commented, “follow these and we’ll probably find this krogan.”

“Shepard?” Miranda questioned over the comm channel.

“We found a bundle of electrical cables on the sixth deck, come on down,” Shepard said as the other team was one deck up from them, “and we’ll see where they lead.” The thick bundle of electrical cables disappeared underneath a gaping space in the floor plates next to a wall and one of the few remaining intact doorways which also happened to be locked. Shepard lifted her omni-tool and scanned it then smirked, the locking mechanism and firmware must be as old as this decommissioned freighter. A minute later and she had it open, revealing a long rectangular room with a door at the other end and a large viewing window to the right. Various pieces of laboratory equipment were arrayed along the left-hand wall.

Shepard strengthened her barrier then cautiously glanced inside the room. “Asari,” rumbled a deep voice and she whipped her gaze over towards the source, “then you are not here with the Blood Pack.” The voice belonged to a massive krogan, fully as large as Wrex at over two meters tall and holding an krogan made Ruzad in his hands. Shepard eyed the evil-looking shotgun with its vicious looking underslung curved bayonet. Between her barriers, shields and armor she should survive the first shot from the powerful weapon, but she probably didn’t want to give him time to fire twice. Thankfully it was a slow firing weapon so if he did fire she had a chance of flash stepping either away or closer. Closer though would mean she would have to deal with that bayonet on the end of the shotgun, not really the most appealing option. All of these thoughts went through Shepard’s mind in a flash, “No, we aren’t here with the Blood Pack,” she activated her external speakers to respond, “we’re here for information on the Collectors.”

The krogan’s eyes narrowed on her, “The Collectors…” he murmured thoughtfully, “so reclusive, and yet if you have what they desire so available. I traded many krogan to them for the technology I needed to finish my life’s work.”

She looked at the cloning tank next to him, recognizing it from those she had seen on Virmire, and at the young looking krogan male asleep inside it. “A krogan that’s immune to the genophage?”

He took two quick steps forward to stand between her and the cloning tank. His weight vibrated the decking underneath her feet as he did so and his unexpected movement caused her to focus her thoughts on not only strengthening her barrier, but also making sure its energy field was perfectly formed to withstand the first blast from his Ruzad. “No, asari though both you and Garm seem to think so, this one soldier inflicts upon the genophage the greatest insult an enemy can suffer…to be ignored.”

“Huh,” Jack commented though their comm channel, “guess these asari helmets along with the blacked-out visors are actually working. He has no idea we’re humans instead of asari.”

“Even aliens see what they expect to see,” responded Jacob, “and there are a lot more asari out here than humans, especially biotic humans. He’ll just assume I’m one of the more muscular asari if he sees me.”

“That’s wild,” responded Jack, “so all you Alliance types did this all the time out here? Pretending to be asari? Didn’t the asari realize you weren’t asari?”

“Yea we did,” Jacob replied, “and yea they did, but mostly they didn’t blow our cover.”
“That’s because they wanted to get in your pants,” Jack remarked knowingly.

“Well…yea usually,” Jacob agreed with a sigh that made the convict cackle with laughter.

Shepard ignored the banter behind her, as none of them had activated their external speakers everything was only broadcast though their comm channel so Okeer heard none of it. She glanced beyond Okeer to the long window behind him which revealed another room, one lined with more tanks. “So, you’re creating a clone army for the Ragar Kalo?” She grimaced, this was looking more and more like what Saren had attempted on Virmire.

“No,” Okeer responded to her surprise, “I have only given them my rejects. They are strong and healthy and that was all the mercenaries desired in trade for assisting me with my research.” Before she could ask anything else he continued, “You may wish to continue this conversation asari, but Garm and his Blood Pack will be here very soon. They were in the process of killing off the last of the Ragar Kalo as you hacked your way through the door. If you are here for information about the Collectors, then I will tell you all that I know if you will stand beside me against him.”

Shepard shut off her external speakers before asking, “EDI how thinned are their numbers?” She wasn’t about to take on the Blood Pack without knowing their odds, even with the promise of gaining some information on how the Collectors operated.

“Seventeen krogan, including Warlord Garm remain as well as twenty-two of the vorcha, five of which are armed with flamethrowers,” the AI promptly replied. “And he is correct they are in the process of eliminating the remaining Ragar Kalo. I estimate they will complete doing so within the next eight minutes, then they will likely enter the freighter to seek out Warlord Okeer.”

“Not good odds,” Miranda remarked, “we need to survive to get his information.”

Shepard switched on her external speakers again, “The odds are against any of us surviving for you to give us that information against seventeen krogan and over twenty vorcha. A better idea might be to wake up your life’s work here and we will call for an evac from the upper deck of the ship. Our scout estimates we have at least eight minutes before they enter the ship, the shuttles close enough to reach us in that timeframe.”

His light brown eyes narrowed on her, “A generous offer,” he responded as he finally lowered his shotgun. He turned toward the observation window, “But we have numbers equal to their own,” he commented as he walked over to a control terminal inset into the wall. “Thirty of my failed krogan remain,” he began punching in instructions, “their training is not complete, but it will suffice to allow them to defend themselves against Garm’s followers.”

That changed things Shepard decided, “Alright, in exchange for everything you know about the Collectors we’ll help you out against the Blood Pack.”

“He may seek to betray us afterward,” Miranda warned her.

Shepard switched off her helmet’s external speaker, “Some random asari mercenary group?” she pointed out. “Maybe, keep an eye out for it.” The other three team members joined her as Shepard observed Okeer releasing the krogan in the other room from their tanks and then give them instructions to meet him below. They would go out to meet Garm instead of waiting for him.

“No reason to let him destroy my laboratory,” he commented when he returned and she inquired about his choice of battleground. Finally, he turned to the cloning tank with the lone krogan within
it, “This one, my prototype, is perfect, the cumulation of all my research.” He turned to look at her, “The genophage kills thousands, but too many weaklings are allowed to survive because everyone is regarded as precious. But the genophage does not select for the strong, only for those capable of surviving it.”

Shepard inclined her head in the asari way of indicating agreement, “So is he joining us in this battle?” After all his talk of the krogan needing to prove their strength she wondered if he were willing to risk his perfect soldier.

Okeer frowned at her, but then turned toward the tank and gazed at the armored figure within, “Strength is proven by defeating your enemies.” He walked over to it and began typing in a sequence, then turned back toward her as the tank began rising to an upright position, “Let us see if you can do the same.” Like the other cloning tanks, the clear bottom panel slid down while the top swing up releasing the krogan who fell forward onto his knees, coughing and expelling fluid from his mouth. It took the krogan a few seconds to recover enough to rise to his feet. Shepard wasn’t certain how aware the young krogan was of his surroundings yet so she watched him closely. The others had simply waited for Okeer to give them orders. Sky blue eyes opened, that was startling. She didn’t think she’d ever seen a blue eyed krogan before. She could see him focus first on her, then on the three asari-like figures behind her before shifting over to Okeer. His blue eyes narrowed on the older krogan in a look that made Shepard suspect the relationship between them was not exactly a father son one.

The Warlord chuckled at seeing it, “You want to prove yourself in battle,” he challenged the younger krogan. “Warlord Garm comes with his Blood Pack seeking a cure for the genophage and to kill me. He won’t be pleased when he finds out that you are my answer to the genophage.”

Shepard crossed her arms, “Why does he want to kill you?” she broke into the conversation. This was starting to sound like it was more than just Garm seeking out Okeer because he had heard the other krogan was possibly working on a cure.

Okeer’s swung his head around toward her, “We’ve both lived a long time, fought against one another more than once. We both have many reasons to want to kill one another.” He turned back to the younger krogan, “The only thing you need to know is that if he succeeds he’ll also destroy everything that I’ve created, that includes this lab, and you my prototype.” Shepard noticed the younger krogan’s blue eyes narrow briefly at being referred to as a prototype, and took note of it.

“I’ll fight, but not for you, your clan or your enemies,” the younger krogan responded, causing Okeer’s light brown eyes to narrow into slits of anger. “I am trained,” he continued, apparently either not noticing or not caring about the older krogan’s anger, “I know things, but your imprints have failed they mean nothing to me. I feel no connection to them. I will do what I am bred to do, fight and determine the strongest. This Garm seeks to kill you,” he waved one arm dismissively at the older krogan, “I care nothing about that, but I will fight him and determine who is the strongest between us,” with that the younger krogan turned and stomped out after his fellow tank-bred.

“Shit,” remarked Jack staring after him, “I don’t know if he’s just stupid or brave.”

“Or stupidly brave,” Miranda added, and for once Jack didn’t anything more than grunt in response to her comment.

“Congratulations, Okeer, you have a…” Shepard just stopped herself from saying teenager, “young maiden, would you like us to go make sure he remains alive long enough to develop some wisdom to go along with his attitude?” Jack barked out a laugh at her comment.
“Insolent pup,” Okeer growled, then looked over at the tube, “I must re-examine my conditioning program.”

“Brainwash him you mean,” snarled Jack.

Shepard ignored her even thought she was a bit disturbed by the idea as well, “Perhaps we should deal with Warlord Garm first,” she suggested to the older krogan.

He swung toward her, “Indeed, then you shall have the information you sought from me.”

They stepped outside into pure chaos, clusters of krogan and vorcha struggled and fought in close quarters combat with one another while others took shelter behind whatever piles of scrap they could to exchange weapons fire. The bodies of several vorcha and a few krogan in Blood Pack marked armor lying upon the muddy ground indicated that Garm’s force had not been expecting any further resistance after they dealt with the Ragar Kalo. Unfortunately, it was equally obvious from the number of dead tank-bred krogan surrounding the remaining Blood Pack forces that once they had regrouped, Garm’s remaining forces were more than a match for Okeer’s cloned forces. Time to even those odds then, decided Shepard, “Stay in your teams,” she instructed, “pick your first targets on the edges and let’s kill some Blood Pack slavers.” She turned toward Jack, “Chose your target and I’ll back you up,” she knew the tattooed woman had been itching for some combat so this seemed the easiest way to let the other woman work out her aggressions.

“Shit, no kidding?” at her quick nod the convict took little time in choosing a target to attack, “fine, him.” Jack quickly chose a Blood Pack krogan about to kill a tank-bred with his shotgun and let lose a strong biotic push in the krogan’s direction. The biotic attack knocked the krogan back, spoiling his aim and sparing the young clone. Shepard followed up Jack’s initial attack with a lift, leaving the Blood Pack krogan flailing helplessly in the air until another biotic attack by Jack de-stabilized it, causing a biotic explosion. Drawing her rifle, Shepard flash stepped forward and put a few rounds into the now heavily bleeding krogan’s head, killing him.

The billowing of a reddish orange rush of flame over to her right drew Shepard’s attention, “We need to take out that flamethrower,” she said to Jack, “you have two grenades?”

“Yea,” the tattooed woman said as she handed them over. The vorcha flamethrower unit was completely focused on the tank-bred they were fighting, so Shepard didn’t even bother to be stealthy. She flash stopped to a position close enough behind group of five and tossed the two grenades, one set to fragmentation and the other to incendiary. Between the two of them, not even the vorcha’s famed regenerative powers should keep them alive. The first grenade exploded shredding though the vorcha and setting off the flamethrower tank whose fiery explosion blended in with the explosion of the incendiary grenade. Nothing moved after and when Shepard saw the tank-bred they had been attacking moving in and putting rounds into each of the vorcha’s bodies she decided to just let him deal with it. The two of them continued like that for another few minutes, Jack proving that she had a good eye for picking out targets of opportunity: A Blood Pack krogan too focused on a tank-bred he was fighting got treated to another lift push de-stabilization combo from Shepard and Jack, and a group of vorcha found themselves lifted into a singularity followed up by a warp to de-stabilize it. Miranda and Jacob seemed to be just as successful, and from what Shepard could tell the numbers of the remaining Blood Pack were now once again even with Okeer’s tank-bred clones. Their odds of surviving this battle seemed to be getting better.

Unfortunately, their success also meant that the Blood Pack had taken notice of them now that they had killed four of their seventeen remaining krogan in the past ten or so minutes. She and Jack
ducked into cover behind a piece of broken off hull driven deep into the ground as they came under suppressive fire from Garm’s main group of krogan. She looked to the side trying to decide if she could perhaps charge to a better supportive position and noticed Okeer in the process of finishing off another of the Blood Pack krogan. “EDI can you give me a sitrep, how is everyone doing?”

“Ten krogan and twelve vorcha remain…ten vorcha remain,” the AI corrected, “of the Blood Pack forces. Sixteen of Okeer’s krogan clones and his prototype remain as well as Warlord Okeer himself. Miranda and Jacob are 22.5 meters away from you at your ten o’clock and are also in cover and fixed in place by Blood Pack forces.” They were losing their momentum and with it their initiative, realized Shepard, she eyed again a position about fifteen meters away that would allow her to make her way out of sight to a position on top of a pile of rubble. The last bit would be rough going but once up there she would be in an excellent position to drop a few surprises right in the middle of Garm’s position.

“Jack give me all but six of your remaining grenades,” Shepard said, and then accepted the eight hockey-puck sized grenades the other biotic handed over.

“What are you planning on doing?” the convict asked her.

Shepard pulled up the tactical map, “I’m going to charge here,” she marked it, “then here and here,” she marked each successive charge, “then make my way to this location and drop a few party favors on Garm’s position. Do your best to make it seem like I’m still here, with any luck they won’t notice one of us is missing until its too late.”

“Hell yea I can make enough noise for two,” Jack assured her, sounding rather enthusiastic about the idea.

Shepard nodded then took a calming breath, carefully focused on what she needed to do, formed the beginning of the tunnel, reduced her mass and then charged across the fifteen-meter distance. She came out exactly where she had planned, her barrier tightly wreathed around her body as she took a few running steps before slowing down as she planned out her next move. In the meantime, she sucked out a mouthful of energy gel, she didn’t want to wind up low on energy at the end of these charges. Alright, she focused on the next position she needed to reach, formed the tunnel, reduced her mass, and charged again. Five minutes and one more charge later and she was now almost across from Jack on the other side of the Blood Packs entrenched position. Jack was indeed keeping their attention, keeping up a series of rather noisy shockwaves though she had to duck back into cover in between each one to let her shields fully regenerate. Shepard started climbing up the rubble, picking her away up the pile of wires, struts and deck plating while testing each step to make sure she wasn’t about to send some piece noisily sliding down to give away her location.

She was a bit over midway to the top of the pile when Jacob shouted over the comm channel, “Grenades! Hit the deck!” Shepard swore as she heard the sound of explosions, though the volume was safely muted by the VI in her helmet so as not to deafen her and gave up all pretense at stealthiness in favor of speed. Besides the krogan wouldn’t hear her anyway as she couldn’t even hear herself moving over the sound of the explosions. Apparently the krogan had been holding their grenades in reserve and for whatever reason decided that now was the perfect time to use all of them at once. Just as she pulled herself up to the piece of plating she had spotted from the other side the sound of explosions ceased though the sound of weapons fire did not. Shepard was concerned, but she hadn’t yet gotten any alerts about anyone’s vital signs so they were obviously still alive and at least relatively unhurt.

“Krogan charging!” that was Jack.
Shepard scowled as she crawled forward, “EDI sitrep what’s happening?” she wanted to hurry, but drawing attention to herself at this point was not a good idea at all.

“Warlord Garm as well as six other krogan have rushed out of their position to directly engage Warlord Okeer and his remaining clone forces as well as Jack, Miranda and Jacob. The remaining four krogan and ten vorcha are providing supporting fire for them,” the AI immediately responded. That meant all of the Blood Pack forces were fully engaged with the battle in front of them realized Shepard. Deciding to take a chance, she rose to one knee so she could see what was happening below. She took one encompassing glance, processing the entire scene. Jack was being pressed by one krogan while Miranda and Jacob had their own to deal with, and in the center the two Warlords were engaged in close quarters combat, Okeer with his Ruzad and Gram with a Claymore that also had a bayonet attached, viciously dueling it out with one another. She couldn’t see where Okeer’s prototype was currently, hopefully the young krogan was still alive otherwise their bargain with the Warlord might be in jeopardy.

She leaned forward, looking almost straight down at the Blood Pack forces remaining in their defensive positions firing upon her team members. She noted the enemy’s arrangement and more significantly, the fact that though the defensive position the Blood Pack had chosen provided excellent cover along the outer sides, it was also completely clear in the middle, meaning there was nothing to protect them from the grenades she was about to drop on them. Shepard didn’t take the time to setup the grenades with her omni-tool instead pulling one stack of four from their container on her belt, hand setting two of them and then promptly tossing them into the densest cluster of vorcha below. She didn’t bother to check the result of the dual explosions, having primed two more grenades and lobbed them over the edge toward where two of the Blood Pack krogan were standing almost back to back firing from the same cover. By now the Blood Pack below were very aware they were under attack and from where, but Shepard didn’t move, only strengthened her barrier as she grabbed the second stack of four grenades and continued her attack. As she tossed the last of those four grenades she paused a moment waiting for the explosion, then rose to her feet and reached over her shoulder for her rifle as took a step forward. She looked down to see the results of her attack. Carnage…eight fragmentation grenades all dropped in the same five by four-meter area did a lot of damage to everything within their radius. Blood, mud and body parts were splattered everywhere, making for a very gruesome display that Shepard did her best to ignore out of long practice, instead searching for any sign of remaining movement.

There was some movement, but not much, and she took a moment to check on her team. Her attack seemed to have allowed them to regain the initiative. Jack was lit up with her biotics as she went toe to toe with the krogan attacking her, hitting him hard enough to slam him backward with every blow. Even as she watched he slipped and went down to one knee giving Jack an opening which she instantly took; slamming a hand, which glowed white with biotic energy, down upon his head. Given the way the krogan’s body jerked and then slumped, Shepard suspected he was dead, and if he wasn’t she had faith Jack would fix that in a moment so she shifted her attention to Miranda and Jacob. The krogan that had been attacking them was dead on the ground in front of their position, and they were now focusing their fire on another. As for Okeer and Garm, Shepard’s eyes narrowed as she focused on the battle between the two Warlords. It didn’t look like Okeer was doing that well against the other krogan, Garm was slightly larger as well as quicker and unless Okeer fought very smartly he wasn’t going to win. No sooner had she thought this than it happened, Garm managed to slip in underneath Okeer’s guard, driving the bayonet on his shotgun though the older krogan’s armor and into his gut. Everything seemed to freeze for a moment, including the two battling krogan then Garm viciously twisted his weapon back and forth inside Okeer. Shepard shuddered a bit at the sight, then began firing at Garm in the hope of maybe saving the older krogan’s life as well as the information he was supposed to have for them. Garm’s barrier held against her shots however, and
then Garm fired the Claymore shotgun point blank into the older krogan before withdrawing the bayoneted end of it and putting the next shot right through the older krogan’s helmet and into his head.

Shepard let out a sound of angry frustration at the sight, all of this and now nothing to show for it.

“Err,” Jacob commented, “Okeer’s dead.”

“Damn it,” Miranda cursed.

“Well shit,” was Jack’s addition.

Something about the commentary caused Shepard to snort with a sense bitter sense of humor, “Kill Garm, and the rest of the Blood Pack and maybe we can get something out of his laboratory computers.” She spared a second to double check the charnel pit below, one figure was now moving, a single krogan who had somehow survived was rising to his feet. She shifted her aim, fired, his shield generator had obviously been damaged because nothing stopped her rounds from penetrating his armor and in another few seconds his body joined the others. She looked up, movement out to the left caught her attention. She turned her head and her pale grey eyes widened to seek Okeer’s prototype charging straight for Garm who was heading straight for Jack’s position evidently having decided she was the easiest target to take out next.

The younger krogan managed to stagger the older as he slammed into the larger krogan, but Garm quickly regained his balance and whirled around to face his new attacker. That stopped him from advancing upon Jack, but now the two krogans were so close that they had to be careful to not hit the younger one while firing upon the older. Okeer’s prototype held his own for a while, trading blow for blow, then Garm managed to bat aside the smaller krogan’s weapon and promptly whipped his weapon around, slamming the butt end of his shotgun into the younger krogan’s helmet. The tank-bred krogan staggered from the blow, and Garm unhesitatingly followed it up with another and another, not letting the younger krogan recover his balance. Garm lifted his Claymore and smashed it down onto the prototype’s helmet, knocking the younger krogan to his knees. The Warlord followed up with another hard cross strike to the younger’s helmet, this time knocking the tank-bred to his back on the ground in front of the Warlord.

Shepard knew what was going to happen next and this time she wasn’t going to let it. Her eyes narrowed as she focused her attention on the Warlord and she charged, coming out of the corridor she already had her arm raised as if bearing a shield and she was, just not one of metal, but one of mass effect fields as she slammed into the massive krogan sending him to his knees beside the younger krogan who was struggling to get back on his feet. Garm roared angrily in response. The first sign that he had turned on his external speakers and had probably been taunting his opponents this entire time, but she had been too far away to hear him over the general din of the battle. She instantly strengthened her barrier as she let Thalion’s memories rush forward in her mind, the dragahîr seemed to almost stretch out within her body as he/she raised a barrier shielded arm to block and repulse the krogan’s first attack as he pushed himself backward probably hoping to knock whomever had attacked him off balance. Instead her counterattack sent Garm once again to his knees on the muddy ground. He/she had no intention of letting him rise, therefore he/she stretched out her hand and pushed down upon the krogan, increasing his mass until he was struggling just to not go face down into the mud. Then he/she stepped forward and placed his/her rifle into the joint of the krogan’s helmet and pulled the trigger and kept it pulled until the weapon overheated and needed its heat sink replaced. Garm didn’t move, but just to be sure he/she drew upon their biotic energies, letting the dark energy flow though and strengthen his/her body and then slammed a powerful strike.
into the beast’s helmet that was powerful enough to not only cave it in, but also drive the helmet into the soft ground underneath. He/she stepped back, his/her barrier wreathed about his/her body and looked again, the krogan did not move, there was no sign of life to it.

The younger krogan finally managed to struggle to his feet and then unexpectedly charged him/her. Annoyed Thalion/Shepard braced himself/herself and raised one arm just in time to repulse the attack sending the tank-born krogan reeling back. He/she followed it up by stepping forward and snapping a dark energy wreathed fist into the young krogan’s body which sent the clone to his knees. Recalling that the krogan was not a biotic, Thalion/Shepard reached out her hand and lifted the helpless tank-bred krogan into the air. He/she then reversed the mass effect field and sent beast slamming into the ground. He/she held the krogan there, steadily increasing the dark energy field upon the creature to press the life from the foolish thing’s body.

Amanda struggled back into control of her own body, keeping the memories of Thalion from outright killing Okeer’s prototype. Finally feeling that she was once again in full control of herself, Shepard released the mass increasing field upon the clone before she actually did kill him. “I would strongly advise you not to attack me again,” she informed Okeer’s prototype as he finally struggled to his feet. Shepard kept a wary eye on him as she stepped back and glanced around the battlefield, with the Blood Pack leader’s death it looked as if they were about done with the battle. “EDI, sitrep please.”

“Only two of the Blood Pack krogan remain alive and they are attempting to retreat toward their transport ships,” the AI informed the team, “they are being pursued by the remainder of Okeer’s forces, of which there are only four remaining besides the prototype.”

Shepard’s eyes narrowed in thought, “EDI can you jam the transport’s ships transponders until we can disable them?”

“Yes Commander,” the AI promptly replied.

“I want those transports,” she announced thinking of the budget Miranda had bewilderedly informed her of just before they left on this mission, “We’re not going to let them reach them.” As they left, Okeer’s prototype followed them, and Shepard kept an eye on him as they tracked down the two remaining Blood Pack members and killed them before they could escape. “EDI jam the transports transponders,” she ordered the AI, then turned toward Jacob, “You can pilot right?” she asked him.

“Yes, I can,” he responded, “we hiding these until the Blood Pack cruisers leave?”

“That’s the idea,” Shepard confirmed as she headed toward one of the five Blood Pack transports, “quickly now let’s get these somewhere else before they come looking for them.” She called in the shuttle pilot, Crewman Mark Smith, and had him land the shuttle inside one of the freighter’s cargo bays before helping them move the last of the transports. Even with his help they just managed to get all five of the ships moved before one of the cruisers finally reacted to losing contact with Warlord Garm’s forces, but also their transport ships by moving into orbit of the planet to scan for their location.

They were hunkered down inside Okeer’s freighter while waiting for the Blood Pack to give up their search when Shepard decided that enough was enough and it was time to confront Okeer’s prototype who had been trailing along behind them for all this time. “You,” she crossed to where the young tank-bred was standing watching them, “you’re lucky I didn’t kill you for attacking me,” she informed him. Really lucky, Shepard thought to herself, thinking warily of how demeaningly Thalion had thought of the young krogan, calling him a creature and a beast. “Why are you still
“You proved your strength against me, yet allowed me to live. Why?” the blue eyed krogan asked her.

Shepard sighed, “Because your young, and I don’t make a habit of killing the young.”

The clone’s blue eyes narrowed, “You think I am unworthy to fight.”

She shook her head, “I think that whatever Okeer tried to teach you while you were within that tank is no replacement for experience itself. You’re not unworthy, just untested and I don’t feel like cutting your life short before you get a chance to actually see what you might be capable of attaining.” She shrugged, “Maybe I’m just curious.”

The prototype appeared to be considering what she had just told him. “I know things,” he finally responded, “but they were not enough for me to defeat Garm or you. Okeer’s clan and enemies mean nothing to me. Without a reason that’s mine, one fight is as good as any other. Let me join your krantt and I will fight your enemies alongside you.”

This…she had wondered if that was what he was after, but hadn’t been certain. “What’s your name, I won’t call you prototype.”

The tank-bred didn’t reply for a long moment then mumbled to himself, “Warlord, legacy, grunt….” The krogan paused for a second, “Grunt was among the last, it has no meaning, it’ll do.” His still startlingly blue eyes focused on her, “I am Grunt.”
8 Days Post-Awakening: Korlus

The Blood Pack never even bothered to send down a shuttle to determine what exactly had happened to Warlord Garm and his forces, they seemed only interested in recovering their transports. Those however, they seemed determined to find. Determined enough that the cruiser sent to scan for them was still searching eight hours later. While they waited for the Blood Pack to give up their hunt for their transports, Shepard kept her people busy with various tasks. She assigned EDI and Miranda to hacking into Okeer’s data and searching through it for any information about the Collectors or anything else useful. That included information on his prototype, now named Grunt, who had now joined them. She sent Jack, Grunt and Jacob out strip the dead for their weapons, spare ammo and grenades as well as anything else valuable. She also had them do a genetic scan of every krogan to help identify them. That information she sent up to the Menrva for the crew to run a search to see if any of dead had bounties on them. Finally she put Joker and Garner in charge of setting up a new ‘Normandy Fund’ though this one would obviously not be named the same, so they could fund their operating expenses. Like the old Normandy Fund she had setup during their hunt for Saren, they were to incorporate and set up a bank account as a salvage company on Illium. Despite its higher taxes, Shepard chose to incorporate on Illium for the same reason many mercenary groups did, you could setup your company relatively easily and without showing up in person as well as operate and access your funding from both Council space and most of Terminus space.

While she probably would have done all of this anyway after her experiences with funding the mission for Saren, the newly incarnated Menrva Salvage Company had been made necessary by the news that Miranda had given her a few hours before the beginning of the mission. They had received a rather sizable bill from the Cerberus station, namely one for the modifications she had ordered for the ship as well as the Anoydine armor and all the armor upgrades they had ordered at the time. Miranda had been bewildered and embarrassed by the fact that she had not been informed of this before she ordered the changes to the ship, but Shepard had only snorted in amusement at the pettiness of it. Apparently TIM had been that attached to having the Cerberus logo flown all over the place by his new SR-2 Normandy. Unknown to her XO, Cerberus had given them a budget. They
would pay for the regular crew’s salaries, basic supplies and a monthly budget of 50,000 credits, but anything else they needed to fund on their own.

Currently, they were nearly three million credits over that budget as the new paint job and refurbished asari-made shuttle had not come cheap. From the way Miranda had acted the Cerberus operative had expected her to react with anger to the news, but Shepard hadn’t been that concerned about the amount. Even before becoming a Spectre she was used to running self-funding operations, for that was how they had ran quite a few of the undercover N-7 missions. They had been pretending to be asari mercenaries after all, and mercenaries weren’t in the habit of leaving expensive equipment they could sell behind nor reluctant to claim a bounty on a dead enemy. Though she had balked at the idea of stripping the dead and turning their bodies over for bounties as a freshly minted special forces operative, she had learned how to get past her moral reluctance for the sake of the mission. It was the same now, they could hardly operate on only 50,000 credits a month given the list of items and ship modifications she knew they needed in order to have a chance at surviving when they went up against the Collectors.

Shepard hopped up on one of the counters in Okeer’s lab, scooted back and rested her back against the wall. She glanced over to where Miranda was glued to Okeer’s computer as she and EDI continued to scan through the treasure trove of information they had found on his experimentations, then leaned her head back and closed her eyes. It had been a very long day so far, nearly twelve hours, and it looked like it would be a much longer one still. The Blood Pack ship, having done a rather random search pattern for about four hours, was now redoing the search in a proper grid pattern. EDI estimated it would take them at least another four hours to complete it. They really wanted those five transports back, but she wasn’t inclined to easily give them up when they were worth an estimated 250,000 for their oversized eezo cores alone. What she was really counting on was that Garm at least would have a sizable bounty on his head, enough that when combined with selling off the transports the amount would cover the three million owed and leave some left over. She frowned, still though, this seemed like and odd thing for the head of Cerberus to do, peeved over her painting over his pretty paint job on the ship or not. Miranda had been horribly embarrassed and confused over the entire matter and it seemed like TIM was just handing her an opportunity to put a wedge in the tiny fracture this provided in the operative’s certainty in Cerberus and crack it open. The question was did she want to bother? Was the operative enough of an asset to spend the energy, time and effort to cultivate? Not to mention the looming uncertainty of her visit to the Citadel to inform the Council that she was alive and although she was currently working with Cerberus could she please be reinstated as a Spectre. Though she didn’t mention it to anyone she knew there was a significant chance of that meeting not turning out the way she wished, but with the bounties on Cerberus personnel after Trident she didn’t have many choices left that allowed her to keep trying to stop the Reapers. She needed her Specter status reaffirmed in order to operate without worrying about them all being arrested and the ship impounded if they were in League space and to hopefully decrease the number of bounty hunters after them otherwise. She grimaced, honestly though there was no guarantee the Council would even see her. They might just have her quietly locked away some where she couldn’t cause trouble while they figured out how Cerberus had brought her back to life. The only reason she wasn’t more concerned about that happening was that Anderson was a Council member. The more probable outcome was that the Council’s price for giving her back her Spectre status might be for her to hand over the Menrva and all of the Cerberus personnel on it.

Quite frankly she didn’t know if she would take that bargain or not, it would depend on a number of factors. The first would be that she could protect Joker and Chakwas from any repercussions due to their joining Cerberus, the second would be that the Council have leniency for Daniels and Donnelly as well as the colonist crew-members who were lured into Cerberus solely on the promise of serving on her ship, and third that she be offered her a ship and crew in replacement and the freedom to
pursue the Collectors. She felt guilty over the fact that she was even thinking about this given that many of the crew members seemed to truly be there solely because she was supposed to be leading them, but the fact of the matter was Cerberus reputation as a terrorist group was well known and everyone on her crew had knowingly joined them anyway. The only exceptions to that were EDI, who had no choice in her creation, Jack, who had joined her only to get info on Cerberus, and Grunt, who as far as she could tell just wanted a place to belong and a good fight. Shepard knew the Council wouldn’t let her spare the AI, but she would make a determined effort to get Jack and Grunt released to her if she had to turn over the rest. She huffed a bitter, frustrated breath, all of that was of course assuming they listened to her at all and didn’t simply blockade the relay, take the ship by force, do what they wanted to those that survived, and inform her she could accept it or resign. She had little to no leverage over the Council to even persuade them to listen to her and that put her in a weak position to bargain for anyone, including herself.

Something was still nagging at her though, Shepard let out a weary breath, something besides the worry of how events might go during her visit to the Citadel. She had the feeling she was missing something obvious, she didn’t know what it was though and right now she was simply too exhausted to figure it out. She sighed, her mind wandering in her tiredness. How was she going to deal with Grunt and Jack and then Jack and Miranda as well as helping her XO develop drills for the crew? So many damn things she needed to do to get the crew even in shape to go after the Collectors and now she needed to consider funding as well. She frowned as another thought rose in her mind, maybe that’s what TIM actually wanted? For her to be so busy with her team, the crew, and finances that she didn’t have any energy left to think about other things? It was a possibility she would definitely have to consider further.

“Shepard,” Miranda’s voice jerked her awake sometime later, “perhaps you should nap somewhere more comfortable. The shuttle has cushions, you could lie down there for a few hours.”

“No,” she automatically protested, shaking her head, “just give me a few to wake up.”

“Commander please,” the earnestness other woman’s plea surprised her, “if the Blood Pack does come down here we need you to be ready to fight them. That means you need to rest if you’re tired. The cargo bay just one deck away, you would be very close if we need to wake you.”

She could see the sense in Miranda’s reasoning, “Very well,” she agreed slowly sliding down from the counter. “If that ship deviates in any way or the other two cruisers move closer wake me immediately,” she ordered the dark-haired woman as she headed toward the door.

Miranda nodded, “I will Commander.”

She must have dropped off the moment she laid down; for she woke up out of an oddly realistic dream of Thalion talking to her, it was four hours later. Amanda rubbed her face as she sat up, that had been a particularly weird dream to have she thought to herself trying to capture the details of it from her wisps of memory. She and Thalion had been sitting at a cafe together. They had been outside as well, Amanda recalled, since she could clearly remember the feel of the sun on her head and breezes bringing the scent of flowers. They had been discussing tactics over cups of eirien tea, which had tasted almost like hibiscus tea, but with the addition of berries. How bizarre, Amanda shook her head in bewilderment, maybe she had somehow placed herself in one of his memories while dreaming? In any case, one of the topics they had discussed stuck in her mind, “You will never defeat your enemy by reacting to his actions, by chasing after him. To defeat him you must determine his objective, then once you know that you must deny him it. No matter the advantage he appears to have, or how much planning he appears to have done, if you can deny him his objective you have rendered all of that useless and succeeded in defeating him anyway.”
Shepard pondered his advice. She knew what her objective was, to stop the Collectors, but was that the Illusive Man’s objective? She thought about the concerning lack of combat experience in the crew, not from a perspective of needing to properly train them, but simply evaluating that fact without reacting to it. Then she considered the ship that Cerberus had given her. Yes, it was larger, yes it had a correspondingly larger element zero engine core, but it did not possess any substantial improvements in its kinetic barriers, armor or weaponry over the original Normandy and whatever had destroyed her former ship had cut the SR-1 nearly in half. For all the Cerberus claimed to be giving her all she needed to succeed in her mission to stop the Collectors, they had also left some very obvious vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities that they had to be aware of, and yet had made no effort to correct. She recalled Nihlus saying that some of the species in the Terminus, and she knew he had meant the Batarians, might actually be willing to start a war to get their hands on a Prothean beacon when discussing the one found on Eden Prime. Shepard’s eyes narrowed in thought, the Illusive Man knew that Collector tech was based on Reaper tech, what might he do, or spend…to obtain it. Amanda felt a chill go down her spine, maybe four billion? Maybe the price of an expendable Spectre, an expendable warship, and an expendable crew? A grim expression crossed her face as she considered the question forming in her mind. Was stopping the Collector’s his actual goal, or was using her to get through the previously impassable Omega 4 relay and gain access to the Collector’s home world or outpost and their Reaper-based technology? What exactly was the risk vs. reward ratio if she was successful and he gained access to Collector or Reaper tech? More, much more than four billion she was certain, probably by an order of magnitude.

She felt like an idiot, all TIM had to do was dangle the Reapers in front of her along with a deserted colony to tug at her past and heart and she had developed tunnel vision and focused solely on stopping the Collectors. Thank Goddess for that dream making her question more than what was directly in front of her. She had been so fixated on the weaknesses that needed remediating in her team, in the crew, in the ship, so that they could stop the Collectors that she had failed to more than fleetingly question why those weaknesses they were there in the first place. She felt certain this was TIM’s actual goal and objective, using her to gain access to whatever was on the other side of the Omega 4 relay. Oh, he probably wanted the famous Commander Shepard to stop the Collector attacks on human colonies, she thought sarcastically and then frowned at her next thought, and for her do so while flying Cerberus colors and under the Cerberus aegis. It both fit in with the we support humanity flag the terrorist organization publicly flew, and - her grey eyes narrowed - and they would spin it as if she were a supporter of Cerberus itself. She gritted her teeth together, no wonder he had been unhappy with her repainting the ship and insisting that there be no public display they belonged to Cerberus. Realizing that she was actually grinding her teeth together Shepard forced herself to take a few deep breaths to relax and regain control over her emotions.

Once she felt calmer, she steered her thoughts away from the idea of being used as an advertisement for the terrorist group and being played like a fool, something that would just make her angry all over again, and focused it instead on the issue before her. How was she to achieve her goal of stopping the Collectors while outmaneuvering TIM and preventing him from achieving his goal? Not a simple task since she would probably have to go through the Omega 4 relay to permanently stop them. While the Collectors could retreat there, resupply, repair whatever damages were done to them - have safe harbor essentially - it would be almost impossible to stop their attacks for more than just a short while. No, to stop them for good whatever base or bases they had on the other side of the relay had to be destroyed. Fortunately, the slow pace of their Collectors attacks suggested a limited infrastructure on the other side…on the other hand though, they could be limiting the frequency of their attacks so as not to raise the alarm about their activities.

Her brow furrowed as she pondered the next logical question. If she had to go through the relay, which was what TIM desired, how was she going to stop him from doing the same? Or failing that,
stop him from being able to access the Collector technology there? Well, she asked herself, what did she know about the Omega 4 relay? From what TIM had told her no non-Collector ship passing through it had ever returned, and he believed the Collectors were able to interact with the relay in a unique way which allowed them safe passage through it. So, they would have to research or find out whatever that thing was which allowed them to transit safely through the relay. If she prevented him from...which she couldn’t Shepard realized angrily, EDI was wired into the ship, and anything they discovered would be forwarded to Cerberus by the AI. She growled in irritation at the realization. She really didn’t have anything against the AI. EDI had been amazingly helpful with the reconnaissance drone, but the fact of the matter was the AI’s presence made it very difficult to impossible for her to keep anything that happened onboard the ship from Cerberus.

She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath, alright then, if that wasn’t an option then the only one left was for her to ensure Cerberus couldn’t actually access whatever technology was on the other side which meant completely destroying it. Or...completely destroying them... She shook her head, truthfully either was a tall order for her to accomplish. At least she knew where the Collectors were located, whereas Cerberus took pains to make sure it would be very difficult for anyone to actually wipe out the entire organization. She sighed, feeling the weight of almost impossible expectations falling back on her shoulders, hopefully she was right about the limited infrastructure, and the Collectors had just a base or station and not an entire world. If there was an inhabited Collector world on the other side of the relay, there would be little she could do besides make a quick raid and then get out. Take the intel back to the Citadel, and pray they paid more attention to her than when she tried to persuade them to move on Ilos.

She shook her head as she thought about it, maybe there was something she could use as leverage to persuade them but what? The answer when it popped into her mind had made her want to smack herself upside the head for not having realized it a moment earlier. Maybe being a Spectrecicle or the Drell neurochemicals had done something to her ability to reason clearly...or maybe she had just not taken a moment to objectively work through this before now she realized ruefully. The Illusive Man wanted Collector technology enough to spend two years and four billion dollars on her so she could go get it for him. She would bet that if she presented this as to the Council as an opportunity for them to get intelligence on Cerberus as well as getting access to the Collector’s technology they would be just as interested. Normally they would balk at the suggestion of going into the Terminus Systems, but the Omega 4 relay was within the territory of Warlord Aria T’Loak who Alliance Intelligence believed owed her rise to power directly to the support provided her by the Asari Republics Intelligence Services. Even if that wasn’t true, the League and the Republics had worked together before to stop the Hegemony from taking over Esan, so it wasn’t a stretch to think the League would be willing to play ball with the Council especially if they shared in the spoils.

Besides...she tilted her head in thought, if the League had access to the technology as well as the Council that would ensure it would make its way out onto the market instead of locked up in a research lab somewhere. While that opened up the possibility of slavers and pirates acquiring such weapons, it might also spur an arms race between the various weapons manufactures as they attempted to improve on whatever technology was found...and that would ultimately help everyone when the Reapers arrived from dark space. Also, there was another reason to make sure the Council saw what was on the other side of the relay. If the Collectors were working for the Reapers, or more likely controlled by them in the same way they had Saren, then there might be evidence of the Reapers which the Council could not just wave away as being a byproduct of her overactive imagination the same way they had the visions given by the beacon.

So, Amanda thought with a smirk actually feeling a stirring of optimism for the first time since she woke up, the revised shinny and new plan: Sell the idea to the Council that they could get access to Collector technology by giving her back her Spectre status and agreeing to her remaining with
Cerberus long enough to use their assets to gain access to the Omega 4 relay. Then she just needed to ensure that the Council was the one who got access to whatever was on the other side while preventing Cerberus from accessing it and cross her fingers there was hard evidence of Reaper involvement that didn’t end up just indoctrinating everyone. That was a concern, but sometimes you had to settle for most of what you wanted instead of all of it and right now she would settle for them taking her seriously. Besides, if they were actually taking her seriously they would take her warnings of the possibility of indoctrination seriously thus mitigating the risk of it.

The lure of Collector tech would be her leverage to ensure the Council didn’t confine her when she showed up on the Citadel, didn’t try and take over the Menrva, and most importantly, that they didn’t prevent her from stopping the Collectors attacks on human colonies. Though none of the colonies which the Collectors had attacked so far had been particularly large or prosperous, Shepard suspected the attacks had done more long-term damage to Humanity than many suspected. It was easy to quantify the lost lives, and decreased production and revenue from the attacked colonies. Harder to quantify however were the rippling effects of such attacks. A decreased interest in supporting new colonies, and a reduced rate of emigration from Earth to the colonies since the colonies were seen as dangerous and unsafe while Earth was protected from any such attacks. Her concern was the fact that there were only 15 or so billion humans in the galaxy, and around 11 billion of them still lived on Earth…which was likely to be a prime initial target for the Reapers. That was not good for the long-term future of Humanity and the Systems Alliance, she thought grimly, not good at all.

“Hey, Shepard. EDI said you were up and moving again, so answer.” Jack’s voice echoing around the shuttle broke her out of her thoughts.

Shepard glanced down at her helmet which she had taken off in the sealed shuttle and placed on the floor beside the bench where she was sleeping for quick retrieval. She picked it up, pulled it down over her head and engaged the seals before answering, “Yes Jack?”

“I think Grunt’s figured out we aren’t asari. Might want to speak with him,” the convict said sounding rather cheerful about it.

“Ah,” she replied eloquently, “I wondered when that would happen. Probably best now rather than springing it on him later.”

Jack cackled with laughter, “Yea, probably.”

Shepard crossed over to the controls by the door, unsealed and opened the asari shuttle’s hatch then stepped down to the freighter’s deck. “Oh, yea,” Jack added, “We got back news on the bounties.” She sounded positively gleeful, noted Shepard so it must be good news. “Someone back in Citadel space really hated Garm. One of those asari matriarchs. Sucker had a 50 million credit bounty on him. Must have slaved one of her kids or something,” Jack noted. “Okeer wasn’t well liked either, though less so than Garm. He has a 5-million-dollar bounty on him. Couple of the others had bounties on them too, but not much compared to those two, a few 100,000 and 50,000 credit bounties.”

That…that was much better than she had even allowed herself to hope, thought Shepard a bit dazed, hell that beat any bounty she had ever had a hand in claiming up until now.

“So how are you going to divide that up?” Jack asked her, now sounding quite a bit more serious.

Shepard turned to look at her, the armored woman’s arms were crossed over her chest. She sighed,
“Not probably what you want to hear, but operating costs and upgrades to the ship, our armor and weapons come first. None of us can spend anything if we’re dead.”

Jack had taken a breath as if to respond but then let it go as she heard her full statement. “Operating costs, ship upgrades?” She sounded a bit accusative, “I thought Cerberus was running this mission.”

“They’re paying the salaries of the regular crew members,” Shepard replied, “and giving us a budget to run the ship of 50,000 credits a month. I need to fund everything else as well as the salaries of those I recruit...like you and Grunt. From what I understand, the regular crew is getting paid around 200,000 credits per year. I’m thinking of setting the salaries for the ground crew to 600,000 credits. Provided we actually collect on those bounties of course,” she hastily added. “Then, after that...the Menrva Fund’s already set up to disperse on the completion of the Collector mission. Whatever is left over will be divided between the surviving crew members and ground team at a 40/60 split.”

“Seriously? You’re supposed to be stopping these Collectors and they’re making you pay for everything?” Jack commented referring to their conversation concerning what they had discovered on Freedom’s Progress and who was actually behind the attacks on human colonies. “Cerberus can’t be trusted, they’re probably really after something else and just using you.”

Shepard huffed out a bemused laugh, maybe she should let Jack handle the long-term tactics, the convict seemed to have a solid grasp of TIM’s likely goals. “You’re probably right,” she agreed, “in any case does the salary meet with your approval and the arrangements for the distribution at mission’s end?”

Jack remained silent for a long moment, and Shepard wished she could actually see the other woman’s face through her faceplate instead of just her own reflection. “I can live with that type of pay, yea. As for the distribution, just so long as it actually happens otherwise I’m coming after you.”

“Fair enough,” responded Shepard. “Now where’s Grunt at?”

Jack jerked her head toward the other side of the ship, “Wandering around where the fighting took place. I think he’s talking with some of the other clones.”

“Huh,” Shepard responded not expecting that answer, then she asked, “and the Blood Pack cruiser?”

“Left orbit about thirty minutes ago, but the Blood Pack cruisers are still in system,” Jack replied. “Your ship’s crew is keeping an eye on them,” she snorted, “doing something to earn their share of the bounty at least.”

“They’re not fighting down here, but they’re certainly not safe up there either,” Shepard commented, trying not to lecture. “In any case, might as well start collecting the bodies to turn in for bounties. Chakwas can send down stasis pods for them as soon as the Blood Pack ships leave. I’ll talk to Grunt while we’re getting that done.”

Jack snorted, “And remind him of who exactly killed Garm and almost squashed him like a bug while you’re telling him you’re not an asari like he thought?”

Shepard winced at the reminder of what had nearly happened, however, “Yea, that’s pretty much it.”

“Probably a good idea,” commented Jack as she turned and sauntered off toward the front of the ship.
Shepard knew it was, Krogan were usually extremely competitive and obsessed with proving their personal strength. Whether over their environment or over others, seemed to be much the same to them, or so she had been taught in school. That was what lead to the Rebellions, once the Rachni were gone the obvious targets to prove themselves against were the other Citadel races. Her military training had only built on that concept in the Krogan section of their xeno-cultural studies, she especially recalled the videos they had shown of the results of the asteroids they had dropped on Turian worlds, the hospitals they had shown no hesitation to attack or bomb to prevent them from offering lifesaving services, and the emaciated, beaten-down slaves that had been freed from their work camps. N training made sure to strip off any rose-colored glasses their future special forces operatives might have been wearing about any of the other species. Concerning the Krogan in particular, they made sure their operatives understood that this would have been Humanities future had the Hierarchy not employed the genophage to stop the Krogan from overrunning the galaxy. The genophage was an ugly thing without a doubt, but the Krogan had shown an equally ugly side of themselves during the Rebellions and nothing they had done since then indicated that history would not repeat itself should their numbers be replenished.

Until she had met Urdnot Wrex, Shepard had seen no evidence to disprove anything she had been taught about the Krogan. Quite to the contrary, everything she had witnessed firsthand out in the Terminus Systems had only confirmed that what she had been taught about the Krogan was simply the unfortunate truth. Wrex proved to be a fortunate anomaly. For one thing, he was the first krogan she had an opportunity to actually get to know rather than their interaction being limited to the immediate kill or be killed. Wrex was far more forward thinking and adaptable than she had been taught to expect; and, as they became friends, he had taught her a lot about his race. How to successfully interact with them, and how to tell which ones would be more trouble than help to her. She was hoping Grunt would prove to be helpful rather than troublesome. She was willing to give him an opportunity, but if he proved too disruptive then she would just drop him off somewhere with his due pay and let him make his own way.

Grunt was standing next to one of the other clones in their yellow and red armor. Shepard glanced at the silvery armor he wore which actually left part of his arms bare and didn’t even have a helmet, and made mental note to herself to made sure they kept both Okeer and Garm’s armor and didn’t send it along with the bodies for the bounties. Either one would be better than the pretty display armor the young krogan was wearing now.

As she walked up to them, she heard the clone say to Grunt, “The words in the glass mother told me that I was not perfect, that is why I am here.”

“Okeer told me that I was perfect,” Grunt replied, “but I was defeated by Garm and by Shepard.”

Shepard shook her head at them once they noticed her approach, “All of us have been defeated at one time or another, sometime ask me about how it went when I went up against a cruiser sized ship.”

“You have been defeated?” Grunt sounded like that was a revelation to him.

She snorted, “Against a cruiser sized ship? Of course I was defeated, but sometimes it’s about first surviving, then giving yourself time to learn and gain experience.” Shepard laughed silently at herself, strong words, only time would tell if she could manage to follow her own advice. “For instance, I’m definitely going to make sure the Menrva gets better armor and upgrades to its barriers and weapons.”

“You are not asari,” Grunt said next.
“I am not,” Shepard replied after a moment wondering how this would go over, “I am Commander Amanda Shepard, Special Tactics and Reconnaissance.”

“Humans are soft, less than a finger deep to sever your spine,” Grunt stated, apparently something he had learned from his tank conditioning, “but Spectres are the best that their species has to offer.”

“That’s what they say,” Shepard confirmed.

Grunt seemed to think about that, taking a moment to respond, “You are the best among the humans then.”

Shepard shrugged, “One of the best human soldiers,” she corrected, “yes. There are some other humans who are just as good as I, and even a few that are better at small unit tactics,” she thought of Admiral Ahern in particular.

“Why appear to be an asari?” he questioned her.

“Timing is sometimes everything, and right now I’m gathering intelligence and building a team,” she responded. “I don’t want our enemy to know that I’m tracking them until I’m ready for us to show ourselves.”

“And then crush them!” he slammed his hands together.

“Yes,” Shepard agreed, “and then crush them.” She was equally amused by his eagerness and aware of how much a headache it was going to be to train him to control it. Jenkins had been eager for battle too, and it had only gotten him killed on Eden Prime.

“Your enemies are the Collectors?” he questioned her.

“Yes, they are,” she responded after a moment, “they’re attacking human colonies and need to be stopped.”

“They are a worthy and strong enemy,” he said, his expression indicating his pleasure.

Around an hour or so later Shepard had worked her way around to helping Jack move the bodies of the remaining krogan with lesser bounties on them. There was no one else currently near them, which was exactly what she had carefully arranged to happen. Shepard turned muted her internal mic and turned on her external speaker, “So how did you end up that turian prison ship?” She asked the question she had been curious to hear the answer to ever since it came up several hours ago.

Jack just stared at her for a moment, then looked around them. Shepard heard a snort of laughter when it registered how far away from the other’s they were, “Fine, one of the Blood Pack krogans walked up behind me and knocked me out on a Cerberus station. They were following me for my bounty and I was there to kill one of the Doctors that experimented on me. Then I found out they had other biotics there. Ones they had duped into thinking Cerberus was helping them, but all of them had lost their parents. Some coincidence huh, that’s what Cerberus did to me, killed my parents and took me. That’s what Cerberus did to them too, killed their parents so they could get them.”

Jack’s body lit with dark energy as she lifted a piece of decking then sent it slamming into another, “Only they got treated decently, and I got experimented on.”

Shepard parsed through what she had just been told, then responded, “I’m aware that Cerberus is
trying to use me.”

“Then why are you helping them,” Jack snarled at her.

“Because sometimes alternatives are much worse,” Shepard answered as she used her biotics to lift the krogan body they had just located onto the nearby grav sled.

Jack was silent for a moment, “These Collectors are bad sure, but are they really worse than Cerberus?”

“It’s what’s behind them that concerns me,” Shepard responded, “the Collectors may only be a front for a much larger threat.”

“What larger threat?” Jack spat.

“The same one that was behind the Geth attacking us, and was controlling Saren at the end through the implants he was foolish enough to accept from it.’”

“You’re talking those Reapers,” Jack huffed, “you know the Turians said you were just imagining that, that it was those…” the convict was obviously drawing a blank.

“Metacons,” Shepard filled in, “yes I saw what he said,” she fought from gritting her teeth at the reminder. “But it really doesn’t matter if I’m right or he is, the fact of the matter is that the Metacons almost won against the Protheans. They spent centuries fighting them and finally were forced to uplift and absorb just about every other species in the galaxy to conquer them.”

“You mean like the Salarians did with the Krogan?” Jack sounded startled.

“Exactly like,” Shepard confirmed, “If that was a Metacon ship the Geth found, then if there are more out there and the Geth get absorbed by them then we are in danger. The Metacons were quite intent on wiping out every organic species in the galaxy in the time of the Protheans, and they almost succeeded…maybe they even did in the end and that’s why the Protheans are no longer around.”

“You don’t know from that beacon knowledge you have?” Jack challenged her mockingly.

Shepard shook her head, “Whatever attack the beacon was warning about was sudden, unexpected, widespread, and after,” she emphasized the word, “they thought the war with the Metacon’s was over.”

That ended the tattooed woman’s mocking, “Well shit, that doesn’t sound good.”

Shepard chuckled grimly as she agreed, “No, no it doesn't.”
Part 1: Chapter 13::12 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 1

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The Mass Effect universe is the property of Bioware/Electronic Arts. No infringement of these copyrights is intended as this is a not for profit fan fiction work.

Rewrite Notes: Still inspired by the Beyonce song “Save the Hero,” from the album I am…Sasha Fierce.

Author’s Notes: Spectre Alena M’Tara is based off LuckyFK’s Confidence picture on DeviantArt, check it out, but not at work since it’s an artistic nude. FNG = fucking new guy.

Revision History: 01/03/2018

12 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 1

The past three days had been extremely busy for the crew of the MSV Menrva, the Blood Pack cruisers had finally left Korlus and passed through the relay twenty-two hours after the team had landed on Korlus. Shepard had been through much longer mission’s before, but this was the first time since her death that she had spent quite so much time in her armor and she had been very thankful that she could at least take off her helmet inside the shuttle when she started feeling claustrophobic inside of it. Once the Blood Pack ships left, they had lost no time sending the shuttle back up to the Menrva for more crew members capable of piloting the five transports they had just stolen from the mercenary group. Three of the transports were immediately sent off to New Canton, the closest independent human colony world to be sold, while the other two remained on Korlus for a few more hours. The first transport they loaded with the bodies of those that were being turned in for bounties, and the other they loaded up with the weapons and armor they had salvaged off the dead. Most of the salvage would be sold, but some of it, especially the armor, would be broken down into its component pieces and into omni-gel which could then be used to manufacture replacement pieces for their own armor.

Miranda had seemed simultaneously impressed and bemused by the speed and familiarity with which Shepard and Jacob worked together to get everything done using the same channels they had while serving in the Alliance. With the assistance of the crew, it only took them two days to complete their various tasks, the bodies handed over for their bounties, the armor and weapons earmarked for sale sold, and all five transports quietly disposed of to their new owners. By the time they were done, the Menrva Fund was 53 million dollars in the black and that was after paying what they owed to Cerberus. When Miranda had passed on a message from TIM complementing her on her speed and efficiency in reimbursing Cerberus, she had only smiled and sent back her thanks while inwardly deriving significant amusement at the thought of his disgruntlement. Which meant that since she had all of that out of the way, there was now only one thing left for her to do before heading off to the Citadel.

“No, Miranda,” Shepard said firmly, “that places the ship and crew under too much risk. There’s nothing stopping the Citadel from blockading the relay and boarding the ship once they realize your identities.”
“But you’re a Spectre,” the dark-haired woman protested, “and you shouldn’t be traveling alone without any protection at all.”

“I’m not a Spectre right now,” Shepard firmly informed her, “and if the Republics wants your heads after Trident, Anderson is certainly not going to protect a bunch of Cerberus personnel. No, I’ve already picked up my documentation that will get me as far as the Citadel without anyone realizing my identity. It won’t hold up there of course, but then I don’t need it to. You’re going to leave me on New Canton and I’ll take the regular transport shuttle from here to Terra Nova and then to the Citadel. I should be back within the next 72 hours.”

“And if you’re not?” Miranda protested.

“Then the rest of the Council has overrode Anderson and chosen to hold me somewhere until they figure out exactly what’s going on,” Shepard replied calmly, “let Jack and Grunt off on New Canton to make their own way and do the best you can until I’m released.” Upon seeing Miranda’s expression, she hurried to continue, “But I don’t really think that will happen. I’m going to take the time during the Terra Nova layover and let Anderson know when I’m arriving, that should help set their minds at ease.”

“Perhaps you should not go to the Citadel,” Miranda quickly countered. “Our disguise worked on Korlus, it should work within the League provided we are careful not to give ourselves away.”

Shepard shook her head, “And if it doesn’t? Everyone faces incarceration if we are lucky and execution if we are not...no, I’m going to the Citadel.” She had apparently been firm enough that time that Miranda realized there was no changing her mind and had finally let her leave, even if it was reluctantly. Which lead her to here, on Terra Nova, the planet she had saved from Batarian terrorists, in front of a communications terminal. She was traveling as Amanda Mitsotakis, hearkening back to her grandmother’s maiden name, something even Anderson probably wouldn’t recognize without doing a search on it. She made the call to the Citadel and then entered in Anderson’s number by memory. Normally that wouldn’t be enough to get her directly through to him, but then she entered in her Spectre ID. That should set off all types of alarms.

She waited for it to connect, then waited some more. Finally, ‘Please Hold’ appeared on the screen and something about the chaos she could sense behind the innocent seeming message caused her to snicker at it. ‘Connecting,’ though sobered her up rather quickly. Then she straightened to attention at the visage that appeared on the screen, “Captain,” she responded by instinct, then corrected herself, “Councilor.” She had never quite gotten used to the change in position, even though she had been instrumental in him being assigned to it.

He snorted, then, “I wondered if it actually was you.”

She sighed, “Despite the fact that it really shouldn’t be, it is. I need to debrief, sir. I will arrive at the Citadel at 14:35 on the transport shuttle from Terra Nova.”

He stared at her for a long moment and then nodded, “They’re suspicious of you so you will need to go through a few hoops, but I’ll make sure it happens.”

Shepard nodded, “Understandable given the circumstances. I’ll cooperate fully,” she assured him, then gave him a smile, “looking forward to seeing you again Anderson.”

Anderson nodded, “Be ready to explain where you’ve been for the past two years.”

Instinct bade her to prepare him, “Sir,” she said warnedly, “Hades did have me, but then the three-headed dog paid an exorbitant sum to Charon to ferry me back.”
“Shepard?” he questioned, looking startled at her statement just before she broke the connection.

Shepard closed her eyes, then quietly said what she somehow knew was the truth, “The Elysium Fields were beautiful beyond the ability of words to describe.” She opened her eyes and stared at the blank screen…how did she know that? She questioned herself, and yet deep within she absolutely knew it to be the truth. Wherever she had been when she was dead had been a wondrous place to exist. That concept existed as a fact within herself that she could not seriously bring herself to question because she knew it to be unquestionably the truth…even though that was factually impossible. How would your body possibly have your soul’s memories when it had been left behind?

“The transport shuttle to the Citadel will be departing in thirty minutes. All passengers for the Citadel please line up for your final security checks,” the pleasant tone of the space port VI announced, pulling Shepard out of her thoughts.

Approximately three hours later Shepard disembarked with the other passengers onto the Citadel. Her grey and dark blue armor had drawn looks from the other passengers who were all in civilian clothing, but she had simply re-polarized her helmet and proceeded to take the time to meditate and run over her game plan in her mind once again. As she exited the embarkation walkway, Shepard glanced around the passenger reception area then zeroed in on the three armored and armed forms drawing everyone’s attention to them. All three were feminine in form, though of vastly different heights and shapes, and wearing asari helmets with their faceplates polarized so you couldn’t see their features. The medium weight armor all three wore was silver and blue and bore the insignia of the Spectre’s on their right shoulders, and Shepard didn’t know whether to feel special, or especially worried, at the sight of them.

All three asari Spectre’s were already looking in her direction and the other humans around her, who had been giving her armored form plenty of space anyway, promptly drew even further away from her. Shepard inhaled once, forcefully telling her nerves to calm, and set out toward them. Her gaze was inevitably drawn to the tallest of the asari trio, who had to be one of the tallest asari Shepard had ever seen before at well over two meters tall, taller even than all but a few human males and as tall as most turian males. Basketball tall, her father’s voice echoed from memory in her mind and she had to tamp down the feeling of nostalgia she felt as she recalled the conversation.

“Well, here I was starting to think we were mythical beasts,” she quipped as she came up to the three of them.

None of them responded to her for a moment, then the second tallest asari standing slightly in front of the other two shook her head and replied, “Rare, but not quite mythical.” She motioned toward a doorway off to the side, “This way please.” When Shepard didn’t immediately move she added, “Unless you like being gawked at?”

“Not particularly, but what’s that way?” Shepard didn’t budge.

“Where you’re going if you want to go any further,” the asari responded as she brushed by her, “I’ll go first if it reassures you.”

The asari’s voice had been mocking, but Shepard didn’t let that phase her. “It would,” she confirmed as she turned to follow, the other two asari Spectre’s falling in behind her.

“Not very trusting of your fellow Spectre’s are you,” the asari in front of her said as they stepped into the area on the other side of the door and it closed behind them.

“It’s been 50-50 so far, so I don’t really have any strong expectations either way,” Shepard reminded
The black faceplate swung her way, “Saren Arterius and Nihlus Kryik,” the asari sighed and then the visor depolarized, revealing a medium blue face with the purple markings of the Asari’s former, and many would argue still, highest ranking nobility. “I believe you hold the distinction of not only being the first human, but also the first Spectre ever inducted specifically to track down another Spectre.”

“Yay me,” Shepard replied laconically as she also depolarized her helmet, causing the asari’s dark blue lips to curve ever so slightly.

“Indeed,” the brown eyed asari agreed, then stuck out her hand, “Tela Vasir,” she introduced herself.

“Amanda Shepard,” the two of them exchanged a carefully firm but not too firm handshake with the slightly taller asari. Shepard looked over to the other two asari, the very tall one and the one which at least was approximately her height. She was starting to feel short, and that wasn’t usual as at just under two meters she was normally taller than most human females.

The very tall asari depolarized her helmet revealing a lavender hued face with both purple lineage markings and what looked like natural purple markings and freckling around her eyes and forehead. Shepard stared up at her in surprise, Liara had some dark blue freckling but nothing at all like this, it was unusual and actually quite interesting looking. One raised brow above clear, lavender colored eyes that almost matched the asari’s skin color jolted Shepard’s attention and she realized belatedly that the asari had her hand extended toward her. “Alena M’Tara,” the tall asari said in a deeper voice than Shepard expected and she had the feeling the nais had just repeated her introduction as they shook hands.

“Cesra Vanis,” the purple hued asari with reddish-purple lineage markings and amused blue eyes who was Shepard’s height introduced herself immediately afterward, stepping forward to stand beside her taller fellow Spectre.

Well now that she had thoroughly embarrassed herself with her gawking, thought Shepard, “So, now that we’re here,” she glanced around at the empty corridor, “what’s next?”

“What’s next is that we continue down this way,” Vasir spoke up waving her hand toward where the corridor curved out of sight. “We’ve setup a room for you to change out of your armor into clothing we will provide you. You’ll hand over your weapon and omni-tool, then go with the medical staff for scanning. After your identity is verified, then we will escort you to your meeting with the Council.”

Efficient, Shepard thought as she nodded, “Alright then,” she said, and then grimaced at her flat tone which betrayed her lack of enthusiasm for the upcoming poking and prodding.

Vasir subtly stiffened and all of a sudden the three asari surrounding her didn’t seem quite so friendly. Their aura’s suddenly pressing up against her own definitely didn’t as she actually felt them expanding to encompass her. “Is there something you want to admit?”

Shepard eyed her carefully, aware that all three asari were using their auras to try and sense if she was about to use her biotics. “Not being enthused about the upcoming poking and questioning?” she responded, careful not to make any threatening moves. “I’ve asked a bit about my reconstruction, but not exactly every detail about how they managed to get me breathing and walking again after having been half burnt then frozen solid.”

The asari’s brown eyes narrowed at her words, but the nais didn’t otherwise react and Shepard suspected the other Spectre didn’t actually believe her. “The scanning is non-negotiable,” Vasir
finally responded, “you’re not approaching any of the Council members until we are certain you are
who you claim to be.”

She gave the asari an annoyed look, “And I didn’t refuse to, I just said I wasn’t looking forward to it
or their resulting questions because I may not know the answers to them.”

Vasir studied her for a moment longer before responding, “Their job is only to determine if you are
actually Amanda Shepard, not to demand the specifics of your…reconstruction.”

Shepard noticed the hesitation before the other Spectre used the same word she had, but didn’t
comment on it. “Let’s get it over with then,” she said tersely earning herself another suspicious look
from the asari. She frowned as she followed Vasir down the hall, why was this bothering her so?
What was up with this passive-aggressive almost sulky lashing out about it she was doing like some
damn teenager? This pit of reluctance and almost dread that just grew as she got closer to the door
that had finally appeared around the bend of the hallway. She just really didn’t want to do this all of a
sudden and wished there was a way to just skip past this bit. She was unaware that her footsteps
were slowing as they approached the door until she realized how far ahead Vasir had gotten from her
and how close the two asari were behind her because their auras were now brushing up against her
own. Determinedly she sped up her pace and managed to arrive in enough time that it was only
moderately noticeable that Vasir had to keep the door open for them for an extra few seconds. She
entered the room, turned, and stared at the image of herself reflected back at her. Disconcerted at the
idea of undressing in front of a wall full of mirrors she turned and looked at the rest of the room. She
frowned puzzled, “A locker room?”

“Yes,” Vasir’s voice was very close behind her, “chose a locker for your equipment. Cesra will bring
you your replacement clothing.”

Shepard grunted in response, still feeling very uneasy, scanned the lockers and moved over toward
one of them. She tried the lock, it was unlocked, she swung the door open stared at her mirrored
reflection there and then pushed the locker door all the way open so that she didn’t have to look
directly at it.

Vasir came up beside her, glanced for a moment at the fully open locker door and then behind her.
“Something against mirrors?”

Of course she had noticed Shepard thought with a quiet sigh. When had she become so mirror
adverse? The first night she examined herself in the mirror to see the extent of the damage to her
body, she answered herself. Ever since then she had simply avoided looking in the direction of the
one in her bathroom or the ones in the female bathrooms on the third deck for that matter when she
was undressed or about to undress. “Just…” she stopped shook her head with a sigh and then
reached up to unseal her helmet. She ignored the searching look Vasir gave the quarter-inch long hair
on her head and the glacially slow healing gaps between the sections of new skin on her face that
revealed the orangish bio-synthetic muscle underneath as she sat it down on the long bench beside
the lockers. Reaching up she began the process of unfastening the armors chestpiece that provided
extra protection for her upper torso and fitted over the medium weight armor underneath it.
Sectioning armor pieces like this was one way the Anodyne armor provided such flexibility to its
wearer, you could wear very mobile light or slightly less mobile medium armor and then fit
additional armor pieces over the top along the chest, arms and legs for added protection.

“Here,” Vasir said as the nais stepped over the bench, picked up the helmet Shepard had just taken
off, and stored it on the upper shelf of the locker. “How long since your last surgery?”

Before she could answer the tall asari, M’Tara, came up to them holding an insert designed to fit in
the tall locker and hold armor pieces so you didn’t have to stack the armor pieces loose inside,
“Here’s the armor insert.”

Shepard took a step back so the two asari could fit the insert into the locker for her armor while berating herself for acting so immaturity. She was hardly going to impress a trio of centuries old Commandos with this type of behavior. She had tried to play off her reaction and yet Vasir had immediately noticed her odd behavior. Not exactly how Shepard wanted to make an impression with her fellow Spectres. “It’s been twelve days since I woke up on the Cerberus station,” she snorted, “to one of their guys trying to re-kill me with the stations mechs.”

Vasir’s brow rose at her answer, “That’s quite recent, do you know why he wanted you dead?”

“No idea,” Shepard responded as she got the front set of fasteners undone then reached around behind her to get the rear ones, “except that from the information I found on my way though he seemed jealous of the woman who was his boss.”

“Here,” M’Tara moved around behind Shepard, “let me help, it will go quicker with two.”

“Alright,” Shepard agreed, not that she really felt had much choice, but she wasn’t opposed to some assistance. When Vasir started assisting with the armor removal as well though Shepard couldn’t help but ask, “Are we on a deadline here?” Part of her mourned the opportunity to make a smart remark about having two asari stripping her out of her armor but she wasn’t sure it would go over well at this particular time, and then of course there was Liara. The last thought brought a flood of mixed anxious and hopeful emotions that she shied away from facing, especially at this time.

“A bit of a one yes,” Vasir confirmed, “it’s going to take them some time to complete your scan and bloodwork.”

Shepard stared at Vasir, “How much time are we talking about here to take a few scans?” She frowned as another possibility occurred to her, “Or are they doing a repeat of the work up they did when I joined?” That made sense as they were trying to figure out if she were actually who she claimed to be.

She felt the taller asari move closer behind her, “Are you objecting to two asari stripping you out of your armor?”

Holy Goddess, the purring tenor voice in her ear was evoking thoughts firesides, fur rugs, silk sheets and maybe some bondage gear. Liara, the voice in her mind reminded her and that was enough for her to regain control over her libido. As Vasir laughed at her reaction she reached up and pushed back M’Tara’s helmeted head from beside her ear, “I’m registering that as a deadly weapon,” she jokingly threatened. The tall asari behind her chucked in response, then stepped back, giving her a bit more personal space and also completely ignoring her question, Shepard noticed. With all three of them working on removing her armor she was down to her undersuit and waiting when Spectre Cesra Vanis returned carrying a stack of silver and blue clothing along with a familiar plastic bag containing a folded light blue medical onesie.

“I noticed I’d never seen you in our dress uniform,” the purple hued asari commented as she placed the clothing on the bench. “I know we don’t have one tailored yet for humans, but hopefully you don’t object to the asari style after you get through with medical?”

Suddenly a lot more interested in the clothing Cesra had brought her Shepard slipped the onesie in its packing off to the side and picked up the top piece, which appeared to be a long-sleeved blue jacket with silver piping and examined it. “I didn’t know the Spectre’s had dress uniforms or I’d seriously thought about wearing it at least to the Citadel functions.” She held it up to her, noticing that the high-necked jacket was cut high in the front and back but the sides went down to her knees. She
looked over at the remaining stack noticing the thigh high boots and what looked like a skin-tight silver undersuit that went with the outfit. She smoothed her hand over the thick but silky feeling fabric and the part of her that still loved dressing up was absolutely delighted at the thought of wearing it. “Thanks,” she said with a smile as she looked up, only to see all three asari staring at her with varying degrees of bemused or amused expressions.

“Glad you like it,” Cesra commented, “I think you’ll look good in it.”

There seemed something off in her voice, but when Amanda glanced her way again her smile seemed genuine. Maybe…she self-consciously raised a hand to her shorn hair, at least it was as thick and the same dark auburn color as before, and her smile slipped.

“Your hair doesn’t look terrible maiden,” Vasir’s voice interrupted her thoughts, “and it is worn with a hood.” The asari reached down and picked up another item. When she held it up Amanda could see that it was indeed a hood, a long one that when worn would probably reach to her shoulder blades in the back.

Embarrassed that she had been so obvious about her concern, Shepard nodded, “Thank you, I’m still trying to getting used to having no hair.” She brushed her hand over the upright short length of it, “At the rate it’s growing I hope it will be as long as I usually kept it in another six months.”

Vasir nodded, then glanced down at her omni-tool, “We are expected in another fifteen minutes,” she announced, glancing sternly at all of them.

Alright then, Shepard thought as she turned a bit self-consciously toward the locker as she reached up for the fastener of her undersuit at her neck. Hopefully she wasn’t expected to strip all the way down to her birthday suit with all three asari watching her. Not that she wasn’t unused to undressing in front of other’s, but it was another thing when everyone else wasn’t also getting into or out of their armor. She unzipped the undersuit all the way to her navel then shrugged out of the suit’s shoulders and began pulling it down her left arm. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Vasir frown at her and then move closer as she stared at one of the exposed areas along her back.

“I do not think this should look like this,” the asari said then reached out and pressed down. Shepard hissed at the sudden pain, then looked over her shoulder at where the nais was pressing. The skin graft edges along the orangish bio-muscle were red tinged and inflamed looking.

“How long has it been like this?” Vasir inquired, then looked over at Cesra, “could you go get Dr. T’Rani for me?”

“Err,” Shepard responded rather at a loss, “I don’t think it was like that yesterday?” She winced at the asari’s return look, “It definitely wasn’t like that after Korlus four days ago.”

“You don’t think it was like this yesterday?” Vasir sternly questioned her and Shepard suddenly had the feeling of being questioned by a higher ranked officer. “You have unhealed areas of skin and you don’t check to see how they’re doing when you bathe?” the nais questioned her. “What, do you bathe in the dark?” her tone was exasperated. Shepard couldn’t quite meet the asari’s brown eyes, actually…she didn’t often turn the bathroom light. She didn’t really want to look at obvious seams in her skin and what was actually underneath it instead of true muscle anyway, and in the dark she felt less like she could be spied upon. If she couldn’t see, then hopefully they couldn’t see. She looked back up when she heard Vasir sigh, “Remain here,” the asari said to her, “you should be in the hospital on rehab instead of out running missions on garbage scows like Korlus.” The asari scowled, “No telling what you might have picked up on that cesspool of a planet.”
Of all the things she had imagined and prepared for, Shepard realized with dismay, she hadn’t come close to considering this one. With her admission, Vasir had obviously decided she was the FNG who couldn’t be trusted to take care of themselves. Shepard emphatically shook her head as she pulled her other arm out of the sleeve of her undersuit and let it hang from her waist, leaving her upper body bare except for her sports bra. “No,” she protested, inhaled and tried again. “No,” she stated in quieter, but more determined, tone, “I have to stop the Collectors from taking more humans.” She hesitated, waffling and then decided that it would just be best to go all in now that she had started, “And I have to figure out if the Illusive Man’s actual goal is getting is hands on the Collector tech on the other side of the Omega 4 relay and stop him.”

“Stop him,” M’Tara unexpectedly challenged her, “and how exactly would you do that? You obviously aren’t taking care of yourself. You aren’t paying proper attention to your wounds, and you definitely aren’t eating enough to support your biotics.”

What? Shepard stared down at herself at the last, noting in dismay the visibility of her ribs underneath her skin, but she weighed…herself or she had been before Korlus. Shit. Yes, she definitely looked like the FNG now. She looked up at the taller asari, “My wounds and weight can be easily fixed, especially since,” she stared down at her gaunt looking torso in frustration and to be honest a bit of concern, “this just happened because I wasn’t paying attention to my weight for five days.” She looked up, her expression writ with fierce determination, “As for how I will stop him, that’s relatively easy, or easier than finding Saren at any rate since I know where his objective is already. All I have to do is make sure the Council either gets there instead of him, or catches his forces there.” She glanced back and forth between the two asari, “And don’t tell me that either of you would let something like this stop you, you would fix the problems and drive on, just like I’m going to.”

“Speaking of your biotics, how are yours so strong now,” Vasir’s question caught her by complete surprise, “How are you charging and flash-stepping?”

Somehow they knew about Purgatory, Shepard realized after her mind caught up with the change in topic. “I told you I was frozen,” she responded, “from what I was told, Cerberus used an experimental process to temporarily force my eezo nodules into a receptive state similar to the condition underdeveloped nodules are in during puberty and added more eezo to them. Since I was frozen at the time, they were able to insulate my eezo nodules from my neural tissues and drain the mass effect field fluctuations that occurred during the process so that they didn’t send me into convulsions and burn out my neural pathways.” She paused and then added, “As for the other, ask the Council they classified it.” That appeared to catch both Spectre’s by surprise given the way they stared at her.

Before they could question her about anything else though Cesra came back followed by another blue hued asari with reddish-purple lineage markings wearing a standard red and white doctors uniform. “Dr. T’Rani, your patient Amanda Shepard. Amanda, meet Dr. T’Rani.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Shepard responded and held out her hand to shake.

The doctor paused just long enough to exchange greetings before beginning her examination, “Unless there is an underlying pathological cause, such as a bacterium or other microbe, this is probably not that serious as there are no signs of obvious infection. Have you recently spent a significant amount of time in your undersuit?”

“Yes,” Shepard responded, “almost 30 hours four days ago and then going on eight hours so far today.”

“How long has it been since you received your skin grafts?” the doctor asked next.
Shepard shifted uneasily, “I don’t know honestly, I only woke up twelve days ago.”

Dr. T’Rani nodded, “In that time can you tell me how much they have healed?”

Her voice was low and soothing, and as she moved around Shepard found herself slightly distracted by the hints of her perfume, very lightly floral with an amber undertone, quite nice. Shepard lifted her arm, turned so that she could see the gap in her skin and compared it to what she recalled from the first time she had ever looked at it, recalled the horror of looking at it, at the soft pulses she could see in the bio-synthetic muscle underneath, when it was beginning to sink in that it didn’t appear that she had any of her actual skin left at all and she was wondering how much of her musculature she had been left with as well or what condition her...she felt cool fingers on her face lifting it.

“Amanda?” the doctor’s voice was softly questioning, but her blue eyes were sharp and probing on her face.

What...damn it, no, no, no, not a good time to get caught up in a memory, “Umm, maybe about...” she hesitated for a second then said, “two millimeters of growth?” She met the doctor’s gaze steadily on, willing herself to bluff it out. Nothing to see here, nothing at all.

“That’s particularly slow for twelve days,” the doctor commented, “I suspect your stress hormones are highly elevated since it’s usually the causative agent in these cases.” She paused for a moment then added, “We will run a few tests through to make sure that is actually the what is causing it along with checking the irritated areas at the edge of the skin grafts for anything that should not be there.”

“So, if it’s not an infection what’s causing the redness,” inquired Spectre Vasir.

“Long periods of direct exposure to the damp fabric of the undersuit,” the doctor promptly responded, “The fabric is moisture wicking and bacteria resistant, but ideally you should be wearing loose breathable fabrics and changing them as soon as possible if they get wet or sweaty.”

The last was directed toward her and Shepard nodded her understanding, “I’ll do my best to limit the amount of time I’m in my armor until it fully heals.”

“What about her thinness,” M’Tara gestured toward her, “she says this is from five days of not watching her weight, but surely she’s not been eating enough for longer?”

“How can you be that thin and not be starving?” Cesra sounded honestly concerned for her.

Shepard sighed, “It really has only been five days, and no I haven’t been starving. I usually eat more than I want to actually.”

T’Rani held up her hand while giving them a stern look, “Not unusual with cybernetic replacements. They take more energy from the body than the muscle mass they replaced, and it seems to take the body awhile to adjust to them. I'll work up a caloric estimate for you to follow after your scans are done.” The asari then gave her a stern look, “It’s better to ensure you are eating enough to maintain your weight, especially while healing, than attempting to regain it.”

“I understand,” Shepard attempted to mollify her, while wondering why Chakwas hadn’t warned her about her cybernetics requiring more energy. She had accounted for her biotics in her estimation of how much she should be eating but not the cybernetics, which went a long way towards explaining why she kept losing weight instead of maintaining it. “Trust me I’ll pay better attention to it now that I realize how fast I can lose it.” She hunched her shoulders, standing here with her undersuit halfway down it was starting to get a bit chilly.

“Tela, could you get my patient a blanket or large towel please,” the doctor said and the two nails
exchanged glances for a moment before the Spectre inclined her head and disappeared from sight at
the end of the locker row.

Vasir returned a moment later with a beige colored large sized towel, which she handed over to
Shepard. To her surprise it had been heated and she slung it over her shoulders with a sigh of
pleasure at the instant warmth. “Thank you,” she included them both in her gratitude.

“Alight,” Dr. T’Rani said, “I’ve got a few more things to prepare in the laboratory since there are
additional tests that now need to be run. Shepard I’ll expect you in there shortly.”

“I’ll be right in,” Shepard said to the asari’s retreating back as she leaned over to strip her undersuit
all the rest of the way down and step out of it.

“Everything maiden,” Vasir informed her, “don’t tell me they let you keep your underthings the first
time?”

Shepard sighed recalling it, “No, they didn’t.” At least she had the towel now, she thought, taking
some comfort from that. “You know I’m plenty old enough to have children, right?” She commented
in irritation as she awkwardly tried to one handed lay remove her bra.

With an audible sigh, Vasir reached over and placed her hands on her shoulders, holding the towel in
place. “You are ready to have a child then? Bear her in your body, give birth to her, nurse and
dedicate the years needed to raise her?” Shepard turned her head to give the nais a rather horrified
glance, in the middle of this? Through the clear faceplate of her helmet Vasir smirked at her, “Strip
and dress in your lovely paper jumpsuit maiden, we just used up most of the extra time in your
schedule with the doctor looking at your injuries.”

Shepard growled a bit in annoyance at Vasir, as now with two hands she quickly stripped of her bra
and underwear and reached for the plastic package. Still though, she knew it could be much worse,
she could be standing here without any towel being held up for her to hide behind. Even more
significant it indicated that her three Spectre guards had decided she wasn’t an active threat, or they
were much better actresses than she guessed.
In the week following the data breach at the Ministry of Finance, Tela managed to make significant progress in discovering who had broken into the Citadel's Ministry of Finance, stolen classified data, and then published it on the Extranet. The successful attack had been orchestrated and carried out by a group calling itself TruthHax who claimed to be an activist group who thought that all information collected by the government should be freely available to its citizens. Citadel Intelligence, however, believed whoever was behind the break in at the Citadel had other motives that had nothing to do with the groups stated manifesto and a lot more to do with a certain volus clan's business interests.

Tela agreed with them. Finding definitive truth of that involvement that would hold up in court however, that would be another matter. Right after the break in and data theft at the Ministry of Finance, Citadel Intelligence had immediately started looking into the possibility that the Volus Protectorate and the Nao Clan in particular were behind it as they had been the most outspoken critics of the Council keeping their economic statistical sources secret. In response to Citadel Intelligence's investigations, the Nao Clan had very publicly declared that they had nothing to do with the break in, were indignant and offended that the Council would suspect them of such a thing, and condemned the actions of those who perpetrated it.

Determining exactly how the TruthHax hackers had gotten in and what they had done once inside had taken many hours of painstaking work sorting through data traffic logs and looking for correlations. Once that had been accomplished then the more difficult task had begun, following that trail back out the Extranet to determine where the attack had ultimately originated. Fortunately, all data connections were logged thought the official communications buoys which distributed the Extranet through Citadel space and beyond. You could obscure your involvement by using a series of intermediary devices, but a dedicated investigator, if they were patient, could ultimately follow the trail back through each hacked device. Tela was that methodical and patient when it came to tracking down her prey. That was the reason Councilor Tevos had assigned her to the case even though it meant putting off her investigation into the sudden re-appearance of Spectre Shepard.

The trail of the hackers led through several different compromised computers, but eventually Tela traced TruthHax’s trail to Illium. That had surprised her, she had been expecting the trail to lead to
one of the independent colonies out in the Terminus Systems. Illium though, that was interesting, and another potential tie in to the Nao Clan who had extensive holdings on the planet. It also made it a fairly simple task to track exactly where TruthHax was operating from on the planet, as Illium’s government cooperated extensively with the Republics Intelligence Service as one of the stipulations for its continued independence from the Republics while still receiving all of the benefits of the Republics protection. With the assistance of RIS’s Nos Astra branch office, Tela had recently discovered that TruthHax was composed of ten individuals who fell into two distinct groups. Six were young and seemingly naive hackers, two humans and four salarians, all males, who seemed to actually believe TruthHax’s manifesto. The other four cell members were volus and were different matter entirely. They had ties to a rather powerful financial company which happened to also be majority owned by the Nao Clan. By now Tela was certain the Nao Clan was indeed behind the attack but she didn’t have any evidence yet to legally prove it. For that she needed to head to Illium herself to lead the ongoing investigation, and while she was there she would also speak to Liara T’Soni, thus progressing that line of investigation as well.

She had actually been making preparations for the trip when the communication from Councilor Tevos had come in, notifying her that Spectre Shepard, or at least the individual claiming to be Spectre Shepard was expected at the Citadel in two and a half hours. She along with Senior Spectre M’Tara and Spectre Vanis were to meet her with the out of sight backup of a C-Sec rapid response team. Shortly afterward they had been sent confirmation of the arrival shuttle location and time by Councilor Anderson’s office along with the video of their target in dark grey and blue armor boarding the regular shuttle service from Terra Nova Starport to the Citadel. Following that they had been given access by Councilor Tevos not only to Shepard’s official personnel files, but just as importantly to Shepard’s RIS dossier, which contained all of the collected information the Republics Intelligence Service had ever collected on the human over the course of her entire lifetime.

Tela promptly reserved one of the conference rooms in the Spectre Headquarters, located on the levels above C-Sec Administration, and requested that Alena and Cesra join her there as soon as possible. Once dressed in her armor, Tela headed there herself, knowing that the other two nais would be there shortly. As they now only had two hours to scan through the data, meet with the C-Sec security team and be in place before the shuttle arrived, Tela divided up the information between the three of them for a quick review. Anything that seemed particularly relevant they would share with the others.

Tela kept the RIS dossier for herself while dividing up the more extensive documentation in Shepard’s official personnel files between Alena and Cesra. It made for some interesting and occasionally odd reading, which was not that surprising considering that RIS normally obtained information on non-asari only when they came into contact with one of their agents or their agent’s network of sources. Therefore, the nature of the information gained depended primarily on the nature of the contact. Shepard’s dossier came with the normal biographical information, details about her childhood, education, military service and any notable life events. The human’s was longer than many Tela had read, but then Shepard had been successfully nominated as a Spectre, it stood to reason she had accomplished more than her peers. The only thing of note that stood out to her in the biographical section was that Shepard’s training in childhood had been primarily in the arts: music, dance, acting and theater. She had been apparently extremely gifted as well, for the dossier mentioned that a human matriarch, who was highly regarded for her abilities as a teacher in the arts, had picked Shepard as her final acolyte and moved to Mindoir to focus solely on finishing her training.

The brutal attack on Mindoir by batarian slavers left Shepard without either of her parents. Even the human matriarch who had trained her had been killed by the slavers. Her father’s mother, a well-regarded judge for one of the many governments on the human’s home world, took responsibility for
her, bringing her back to Earth. There Shepard’s path abruptly diverted from the arts to the military. Instead of attending one of Earth’s academies for the arts, Shepard had instead enrolled in a military academy. Again, she had excelled, rising in the regard of both trainers and peers as one of the more talented cadets, a term which seemed to equate to huntress trainee. She had continued to excel during her training at the Systems Alliance Military Academy, graduating among the top of her class, and then conclusively proven her military acumen and ability to lead during her military service.

Then came the first odd entry in the RIS dossier, a report about a brief liaison with a Commando maiden shortly after the events on Elysium. At Shepard’s request they hadn’t melded, and the maiden had commented how much she had regretted that during the pleasuring that followed due to the human’s unusual intensity and focus. Tela suspected the incident had only been included because the subject was the human’s ‘Lion of Elysium’ as the human press had called Shepard after her successes on Elysium against overwhelming odds. The encounter indicated that Shepard was at least curious about asari, something that was of course proven later with her relationship with Liara T’Soni, and Tela didn’t doubt that RIS had documented it because they felt it was something that might be exploited in the future if necessary.

The next series of entries came after Shepard’s training at the System Alliance’s Interplanetary Combatives Academy, the human’s version of Commando level training, and her graduation from there as a N4 ranked special forces operative. That placed her in the upper ten percent of the graduating class, as the remainder were assigned a N3 ranking upon completion of their training. Tela knew that the Alliance ran anti-slavery and anti-piracy operations out in the Terminus Systems. She had even run across a few of them herself while on her own missions, so she was aware that they frequently attempted to obscure the fact they were humans by pretending to be asari. Usually they failed rather dismally at it, apparently assuming that wearing concealing armor and asari helmets without making any effort to actually act like asari was enough to keep them anonymous. Quite frankly Tela thought they were fortunate that most Terminus asari simply didn’t do anything to single out the clumsily moving, culturally blind ‘asari’ in their midst.

Shepard was apparently an exception, something that didn’t come as a much of surprise to Tela given what she now knew of the human’s childhood background. Shepard was able to, at least superficially, pass as an asari when undercover as one - even to other asari. That meant that Shepard was not only unusually graceful in her movement for a human, probably as a result of her dance training, but had made enough of a study of asari mannerisms to not immediately give herself away among them. Also, probably due to her early training, but this time in theater and acting as a performer. Tela’s brown eyes narrowed as she thought about this particular piece of information, it also implied that Shepard had the ability pull off a deception successfully, something to keep in mind…provided of course they were actually dealing with Shepard or a clone with her memories and not a Cerberus impostor. Shepard was also multi-lingual. She was an expert in Human English, and conversational in Human Celtic Gaelic and Greek, and in Turian, Batarian and Thessian.

The three of them spent the last twenty minutes of their time discussing their target, known strengths, known weaknesses, her new biotic abilities. Then they decided on an approach. Their tasking was twofold, to stop their target if she proved hostile or to have hostile intentions, and determine whether or not, despite the odds against it, whether this was actually Shepard. In the meantime, with only a few suggestions about how to accomplish it, C-Sec had done a wonderful job in throwing up a temporary corridor leading off the arrivals terminal to C-Sec’s medical ward where they provided treatment for their prisoners. Careful routing would ensure that their target never realized where exactly she was going or how segregated she was being kept until her identity could be confirmed. Once there, they would quickly separate their target from her armor and weapons. That still left their target’s biotics to deal with, but then that was why Tevos had assigned three asari Spectre’s to this task instead of anyone else.
Time was up. The three were still strategizing on their way to the shuttle arrivals terminal, deciding how to approach their target, and how to gain the advantage over her in case she did prove hostile. In this they followed what was essentially the Huntress’s mantra: Gain the initiative, keep your target reacting to you rather than acting, and instantly exploit any weaknesses exposed by your target. The only exception they would be making was to not assume their target was hostile, or treat her in a hostile manner, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t subtly try and keep her off balance and keep a close and careful watch on her. Also since Shepard, and presumably any clone with her memories or operative trained in covert operations, was trained as an actress, as soon as they were sure she had no grenades of any kind on her they would open their rebreathers to the outside atmosphere and use their sense of smell to discern whether or not their target’s feelings matched her actions. It wasn’t infallible, but often it was very accurate.

At the arrivals terminal, Tela spent the last few minutes ensuring everyone was in place before joining the other two Spectres and proceeding out into the passenger arrival area. Everyone in the area noticed them, and everyone gave them wide berth upon seeing the Spectre symbols on their shoulders. Everyone except for one lone female human passenger in grey and dark blue Terminus-style armor who spotted them as soon as she exited the shuttle ramp and immediately headed in their direction.

Twenty-five minutes later, “So, do you think that is really Shepard?” Cesra asked her and Alena as they entered the small room next to the C-Sec medical examination room where they could monitor what was going on within and intervene if necessary.

She and Alena glanced at one another, their subtly frowning expressions almost mirrors of one another. Tela glanced purposefully away and the taller matron answered, “I don’t know, Cerberus is known for planning out some fairly elaborate deceptions, but I’m having difficulty imagining why they would so extensively replace a clone or operatives skin and musculature just to persuade us that her story is true. It would be just as easy to craft a plausible story that didn’t require it.”

Cesra frowned at her, “So, that’s a yes?”

“That’s a let’s let the doctor do her work,” Tela responded as she walked over to the display screen which showed what was going on in the examination room, “there are ways around the DNA scanners used at the arrival points, but not the cellular DNA testing we are doing to confirm her identity.”

Alena walked over to stand beside her, and Tela looked up at her fellow Spectre at her exhaled breath. “Medical wouldn’t release any of us in that condition, why was she even on Purgatory or Korlus…” she paused and the two of them glanced at one another. “I’ll send it in,” Alena said next activating her omni-tool and Tela nodded, they needed to know what Shepard had been doing on Korlus.

Cesra came up beside them, “What’s going on?” the maiden inquired.

“Getting Intelligence to find out what she was doing on Korlus,” Alena responded as she typed in the information.

Cesra nodded then looked up at the monitor, at her quick inhaled shocked sounding “Goddess,” both of them looked up as well. Tela took a step back so she could see the long upper monitor that was currently displaying the results of the first scan. None of them were medical professionals, but as they all were Commandos, they had all had their share of injuries over the centuries and had seen scan
results of their own bodies. A human’s body shouldn’t look that different, certainly not as different as what they were looking at now. Some of what Tela was seeing she could guess at what it was simply from having seen Shepard’s body earlier. The denser material underneath the skin of her face, the entirety of her right arm, both hands, most of her left leg, and varied other places along her body was the bio-synthetic muscle they had seen in between the skin grafts earlier. Denser looking bone was undoubtedly the newer ceramic type bone replacement material, but even the bone that hadn’t been replaced appeared to be denser than it should be on the scans. Tela’s gaze shifted back up to the skull area, both eyes were very obviously cybernetic and it seemed as if most of the facial bones had needed replacing, what seemed to be natural bone left around the skull had been reinforced and protected with metal plating which also extended down the spine. Her gaze followed that along and spotted several of the spinal column disks had been replaced as well.

Beside her, Alena exhaled a loud breath and then wondered, “How is she even still alive after that much damage?”

A disquieting thought entered Tela’s mind, the report Councilor Tevos had mentioned, the one the Council of Matriarchs had unsealed said that Shepard’s body had been found by the Blue Suns who intended to sell it to the Shadow Broker who intended in turn to sell it to the Collectors. Nowhere had it been implied that Shepard had been alive and in stasis, in-fact the terms used seemed to specifically imply just the opposite, that Shepard had been dead and they were turning over a corpse. She gazed up at her friend, “You heard what she said about how she knew how to charge and flash-step?”

Alena nodded, “Should I stay for the cellular DNA verification?”

Tela glanced at the monitors, the human seemed fairly calm and though she had been reluctant and anxious at times she had so far displayed no evidence of hostility not by action nor by scent. “Go, but be back as soon as you can.” Alena nodded, turned and strode swiftly from the room.

Cesra stared after her then turned toward Tela with a curious look, “I guess her reply to that question was unexpected and interesting?”

Her eyes still glued to the monitors, Tela nodded, “It was indeed, and implied that the answer to it should already be known.”

The younger Spectre mused over that for a bit, “Something found while she was chasing after Saren perhaps?”

Tela tilted her head to the side considering it, she was fairly certain that Cesra was referring to the two beacons Shepard had interacted with during her mission. “It’s possible,” she finally responded. That might be the answer, but this wasn’t the place to be discussing something classified by the Council. Something on the monitors caught her eye, now that she had the scan data it looked like Dr. T’Rani was getting ready to take the biopsies necessary to obtain samples for the cellular DNA testing. This would be a bit uncomfortable for the human, but she knew the doctor would make getting the biopsies as painless as possible. To conclusively verify Shepard’s DNA, they needed three different samples from original tissues, the first would be a bone cell sample, the second a blood sample and the third an oocyte sample. Between the three they would know whether or not this was actually Spectre Amanda Shepard. She frowned as she saw Dr. T’Rani motion for Shepard to sit-up and then went to fill a small cup with water for her. Or apparently the doctor wasn’t about to do the biopsies yet, she reached over and increased the volume of the speakers, so she could actually hear what was being said instead of just an indistinct murmur.
“In order to verify your identity, I need to take cellular biopsies from tissues and organs that haven’t been cloned or otherwise altered,” Dr. T’Rani was explaining to the human, “it would help if you could tell me whatever you’re comfortable with about your injuries and the reconstructive surgery done by Cerberus restore you to health.”

The nais frowned, why would the doctor be questioning Shepard about the extent of her injuries instead of gathering the cellular samples as planned? The only reason she could think of was that the scan showed that one of the planned samples was unavailable. Presumably she still had blood running through her veins, and there appeared to be some bone left… Oh, Tela dipped her head in regret, and she had just teased the maiden about not being yet ready to have children. Perhaps she was wrong, but she suspected that she wasn’t wrong. That meant the doctor would have to expand the number of samples needed to obtain the same level of certainty in the accuracy of the DNA test, which would be why she was asking about this.

“Why isn’t she just taking the samples?” Cesra questioned sounding puzzled as she stared at the monitor. “There isn’t a lot of time left in the schedule for questions without delaying the meeting with the Council.”

Before Tela could figure out how to respond, especially given the sensitive nature of what she suspected, the sharp, bitter sounding bark of laughter snapped both nais’s attention back to the monitor. “That messed up inside am I,” Shepard commented, then looked off to the side with a sigh as she closed her eyes for a few seconds and seemed to regain control over emotions. The human snorted, “So much for not needing the details of my reconstruction.” The last was said a bit louder, and Tela faintly smirked knowing the human had guessed they were still watching and that had been directed at her. In truth though, she had not thought such details would be required. Shepard returned her attention back to Dr. T’Rani, “Unfortunately doctor I don’t know exactly what happened to me after I died. I can make some guesses, but everything else is just based off the bits of info I found on the Cerberus station where I woke up.”

T’Rani stared at her thoughtfully for a moment before speaking, “It was not anticipated that I would need such information, and for that I apologize for bringing up such a difficult topic. That is why I asked only for what you are comfortable sharing with me.”

“And my fellow Spectre’s and the Council…” Shepard added in a dry tone then waved irritably at the doctor when it looked as if she would say something in response and said in a clipped tone, “never mind, I understand.” She didn’t give the doctor time to respond before launching into her tale, “You know that the Normandy was attacked and destroyed by an unknown vessel,” Shepard’s voice was flat and toneless, but the way her hands were still and pressed against her thighs another story.

Beside her Cesra sighed and Tela glanced over at the frowning maiden, she wasn’t exactly comfortable with this either. If this were actually Shepard, and she had only woken up twelve days ago, then the nais doubted the human had any opportunity to speak about this with anyone. Her first time discussing it shouldn’t be in these circumstances, but none of them had much choice given the situation and doubts concerning this human’s identity. “I am aware of that,” T’Rani stated, her voice carefully modulated to project reassurance and concern and Tela returned her attention to the monitor. Given the doctor’s tone, she had no doubt an asari could clearly scent the layered calming, soothing and reassuring pheromones from her. What a human could smell with their deadened nose the nais had only a faint idea, perhaps only a few of the most obvious scent notes since that’s what she recalled from her melds with humans.

Shepard nodded and then continued, "I was helping my pilot get to an escape pod when they made their final attack. I didn't make it into the pod, but I did manage to hit the release for it so that he
made it before I was flung into space by an explosion." This part they already knew, thought Tela as it had been in Pilot Moreau’s report. "Sometime during all that my air supply was damaged. It didn't take long for it to bleed out into vacuum." Shepard seemed to shake her head just a little, and her hands clenched on her thighs. T’Rani straightened as if to go to her, but then she continued, “The last thing I remember before I died was staring through my visor at the planet we were near when we were attacked. It was an ice planet, white clouds upon a white snow and ice-covered surface...quite beautiful actually."

It might have seemed a strange thing to notice and mention, but Tela was aware that sometimes you intently focused on the scene in front of you when you thought it was going to be your last. “Do you know what happened after that?” T’Rani’s tone was still calm.

“My body was caught in the planet's gravity well, and, after not burning completely up on re-entry due its thin atmosphere, impacted on the surface. The scan I saw of my body on the Cerberus station…” Her voice faded for a moment, and Tela thought she wasn’t, or couldn’t, continue, but then she shook her head and went on, “This arm,” she raised her right arm, “the bone looked like it had been pulverized, only fragments of bone left.” She sighed and glanced off to the side, “The rest of me didn’t look much better honestly.” She fell silent for a moment and Dr. T’Rani looked as if she were about to say something when Shepard continued, “And then my body froze, the temps on Alchera average negative twenty-two degrees Celsius. From what I know, I don’t think they thawed me out for quite some time.”

Dr. T’Rani looked about as taken aback by that statement as Tela felt, she thought the human had been exaggerating for effect, but apparently not. The question was any of this actually true or only what Shepard believed was true. “Why do you believe that?” T’Rani asked.

“Do you think that’s really true?” Cesra quietly asked her as they both stared at the monitor, listening intently to the conversation going on in the examination room.

Tela sighed, “I don’t know, but I think she believes it. Hopefully Dr. T’Rani can determine whether or not Cerberus actually did bring her back to life after so long.”

“My eezo nodes in my body are larger than they were when I got my medical examination after becoming a Spectre, aren’t they?” Shepard stated.

Dr. T’Rani stared at Shepard for a long moment without saying anything, long enough that Tela wondered what the doctor could possibly be thinking about. Finally, she inclined her head, “I did notice a discrepancy when I viewed your scan data, give me a moment to pull up the comparison view from your file.” The blue complexioned asari moved over to a data terminal and began pulling up the information. A few minutes later the doctor motioned for Shepard to join her, “This is a view of the nodes in your left arm.” She enlarged view down to a comparison between the same single node, “As you can see its actually slightly larger, but more significantly its over twice as dense as before.” T’Rani fell silent for a moment, a very slight frown betraying her emotions, finally she asked, “Do you know how Cerberus accomplished this?”

Shepard nodded, “I told this to Spectre’s Vasir and M’Tara just before you came in,” she commented, “Cerberus was able to force my eezo nodules into a receptive state, similar to the way they are during puberty, and then exposed them to another dose of element zero.”

T’Rani inclined her head once again, but more significantly to Tela did not really look surprised by the information. “Do you know the procedure they used?” the doctor inquired looking back at the display.
Shepard turned her head and gave the doctor a sharp inquisitive look, “From what I was told the procedure produces mass effect field fluctuations in the eezo nodules that are strong enough to burn out the neural pathways of the patient. Since I was still dead and frozen though when they did it, they were able to insulate my neural pathways from my eezo nodules and bleed off the fluctuations before they caused too much…” she smiled with sour wryness as she finished, “more damage to my body.” Neither of them spoke for a moment then Shepard said, “You know something about this don’t you.”

Beside her Cesra shifted but neither of them said anything, instead both waited to hear how Dr. T’Rani would respond. “Now that you’ve described it,” the doctor responded, “yes, it is familiar to me. Shortly after the first salarians displayed biotic abilities after being exposed to element zero during puberty, the Republics government funded experimentation to determine whether or not it was possible to replicate this effect on asari. As you described the researchers were able to induce the eezo nodules of… the test samples… into a receptive state, but then ran into the same difficulty you mentioned that the resulting fluctuation in the mass effect fields from the process itself would prove lethal. When no progress was made after several decades, the government funding was withdrawn and efforts to find a solution became sporadic. Few know of it now, but there was a biotics researcher at a symposium I attended a few decades ago who brought up the study during their presentation. I thought it interesting at the time which is why I recalled it during your description.”

“So, Cerberus just borrowed from that research,” Shepard turned and paced away from the doctor. “And since they had a frozen beat up body to work with said hey,” the human turned as she reached the counters on the other side, “why not try this, if it works we will be a step closer to our biotic super soldier.” She crossed her arms over her chest, an effect that was ruined a bit by the light blue examination jumper she was wearing, “If not she will just be a bit crisper than before.”

Dr. T’Rani’s head whipped around as she gave the human an incredulous look, “You should not speak so dismissively about what has happened to you.” Tela had to admit, she didn’t quite know how to take what the human had just said, but at another level she understood it or at least perhaps the motivation behind saying something like it.

“Right,” Shepard sighed, looked away her lips tightening, whether in anger or some other emotion Tela couldn’t quite discern. “I guess I shouldn’t bring out the Spectre joke either,” she commented, and the listening nais was now certain the emotion was resentment.

“Spectre…what?” Alena said incredulously from behind them as she entered the monitoring room.

“Frozen,” Cesra commented, “she’s referring to having been frozen,” and Alena’s incredulous expression transferred from the overhead monitor to the maiden.

The expression on T’Rani’s face softened, “No, it is I who need to apologize, if this form of humor helps you cope with what happened to you then it does.” She sighed, “You are not the first, nor will you be the last Spectre to do so.”

Shepard turned to look at her with a huff of laughter, “Gotta deal with this shit somehow. Good to know I’m not the only one with a questionable sense of humor.” She sighed, “Though admittedly it’s not usually quite this black.”

“Black?” the doctor questioned, puzzled by the reference.

“Black humor, gallows humor?” Shepard tried to explain. “Humor in the face of death or perhaps despite death would be more accurate.”
“Was there something?” Tela took a moment to ask the tall asari who was now standing beside her, referring to the question of how the human suddenly knew how to charge and flash-step.

Alena inclined her head, “There might be, but we can discuss it later.” Understanding that the other nais meant this was not a secure enough space, Tela let the subject drop. Cesra, who had been listening in likewise did not say anything. She looked thoughtful however, at the confirmation that there might be an explanation which the Council was already aware of instead of their original assumption that Cerberus was somehow responsible for it.

“So that was why you said your body remained frozen for a period of time, it had to remain so for long enough for them to complete the process of increasing your biotic abilities,” Dr. T’Rani commented after Shepard finished speaking. The asari doctor looked thoughtful, a slight frown furrowing her brow as she considered something. A moment later she carefully said, “Even if you were frozen however, you could not have remained so for too very long, because your neural pathways would have still degraded in such conditions. Slower perhaps at the temperature you mentioned, but they would have still degraded within a rather short period of time.”

Instead of taking that as a challenge of her version of events Shepard just nodded, “You’re right they would have…which was why they saturated my neural tissues with drell neurochemicals to keep my memories stable so they could extend that amount of time.”

Dr. T’Rani’s eyes widened in surprise at that piece of information, “You are certain of this?”

Again Shepard nodded, “The doctor on the Normandy did a neurological scan and found physical changes resulting from the use of the neurochemicals.”

“I notice she’s not mentioning who this doctor is,” Alena noted and Tela smirked because she had noticed the same thing.

“Would your doctor be Dr. Karen Chakwas?” Dr. T’Rani inquired.

If she hadn’t been intently observing the human, Tela wouldn’t have noticed the brief betraying stillness before it as gone and Shepard curiously inquired, “Why would you think that?”

Tela’s brown eyes widened, “Oh she’s good, very good.”

The doctor responded, “A question relating to cybernetics and daily caloric usage made its way to my desk from another colleague from her since reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation are my specialties. From what I have heard Dr. Chakwas is an excellent trauma surgeon and general practitioner, with an unusually wide range of species specific certifications. You are very lucky to have her as your physician.”

Shepard’s light grey eyes narrowed just slightly, “We were lucky to have her on the Normandy, she saved several lives.”

Alena huffed out a laugh, “Nicely non-committal there, but I think we need to look into this doctor’s background. Find out how long she’s been involved with Cerberus. She might lead us to others.”

“True,” Cesra commented glancing over at the taller asari, “interesting how hard she’s trying to protect her. Just out of loyalty I wonder…”
"Have you experienced any changes to your memories due to this?" Dr. T'Rani’s questioned, and that had all three asari returning their attention to the monitor to listen to the human’s answer.

“Yes,” Shepard responded after a brief moment, “I’m remembering things I had forgotten from my past, and my memories now are rather more detailed and accurate than before. I suspect it’s something like having a grey box.”

How would that even be, wondered Tela suddenly, to wake up after you thought you were dead…or maybe in this case had been dead, and your body had been extensively reconstructed, your memories were different and you were in the hands of terrorists. She crossed her arms over her chest as she considered it. If this actually were Shepard, which it was starting to seem more and more as if that were possible, even though the tale behind it was even more unlikely than anything they had theorized, then she was very impressed with the human maiden. Shepard might not have been monitoring her health as closely as she should have been, but it seemed as if that had been a case of not having the right information instead of neglect. What she found impressive was that instead of simply returning to the Alliance and Council, Shepard seemed determined to turn the situation to the Council’s advantage and use her presence inside Cerberus to thwart their objectives.

“Do you know why your skin required such extensive replacement?” the doctor inquired next.

“Not exactly,” Shepard admitted, “but I found a log on the Cerberus station that mentioned long term exposure to cold and vacuum caused significant cellular breakdown. I suspect that did a number on my skin along with the heat of re-entry even with Alchera’s almost non-existent atmosphere.”

“You’ve mentioned twice now finding information on the Cerberus station where you woke up,” commented Dr. T’Rani. “Were you woken up and then informed of what had happened to you by their medical personnel?”

Shepard snorted, an actual snort, and then began laughing. It wasn’t exactly a happy laugh however as it had a definite stressed undertone to it. Tela exchanged concerned looks with the other two asari and re-evaluated her impression of whether or not it was a good idea to send Shepard off on a mission against Cerberus. Perhaps it was a better idea to keep her here long enough to heal and recover from her injuries - both the physical and the mental ones.

“Ah ha, sort of,” Shepard managed to get herself quickly under control again. “No, I was woken up with Miranda yelling at me to get out of bed, as if I’d been oversleeping, because the facility was under attack. Then it was pretty much hurry to find a weapon, and then hurry to get into cover before the mechs heading my way killed me. Turns out the other guy in charge of my reconstruction, Wilson, was in someone else’s employ besides Cerberus and they didn’t want me to wake up.”

Tela drew in a breath, the Shadow Broker? Had he tried again to obtain Shepard for the Collectors? Or rather her body, for this Wilson had evidently been assigned to kill her. The nais frowned, maybe she and Tevos had been wrong about the source of who had led the Collectors to the Normandy’s location and it hadn’t been Cerberus at all, but the Shadow Broker.

“I lost contact with Miranda shortly after I woke up,” Shepard continued. “Since the mechs were just as busy killing off the Cerberus personnel as they were trying to kill me, I had the opportunity to snoop through every data terminal I passed and that’s exactly what I did. I hacked into each one trying to figure out what the hell was going on, where the hell I was as it was definitely not an Alliance facility, and why the hell wasn’t I dead. Then I met up with Jacob and that was when I found out I had been dead for two years instead of a few minutes and that when I arrived I was most definitely dead. Nothing but meat and tubes as he put it,” Shepard smiled bitterly, “but at least he was
pretty sure I wasn’t a clone.” She sighed, “So, no it didn’t quite go the way you mentioned.”

For all of her six hundred plus years, Dr. T’Rani looked as dumbfounded and taken aback by this as Tela was at her mere four hundred and twenty.

“That’s…” Cesra seemed at a loss for words, “Goddess what a way to find out what happened to her.”

“If it’s even all true, or just what they want her to believe,” Alena responded to her. “I’m having difficulty believing they could actually bring her back to life after what she described happening to her.”

Tela knew that Alena wasn’t going to be the only one with those doubts, a majority of the Council members would question this chain of events as well. She didn’t know whether or not she believed it, but she was willing to see what evidence Dr. T’Rani could find to either prove or disprove it.

“Let’s wait and see what the scans and cellular samples show, they might still the waters and reveal what lies beneath these waves.”

Alena inclined her head in agreement with her, “Indeed, we should wait to see what they reveal.”

“You say Dr. Chakwas found evidence verifying that these Drell neurochemicals were actually used in a neurological scan?” Tela glanced back at the monitor, her attention caught by the doctor’s question.

Shepard gave the doctor a reproving look, “I said a doctor did a neurological scan and found evidence of it.”

Unsurprisingly the humans disapproving expression didn’t seem to have much of an effect on Dr. T’Rani, “Then I believe the prudent thing to do is to perform one as well to obtain that evidence and conclusively prove or disprove whether or not such chemicals were used on you. I would also like to re-scan you with the newer scanning equipment available at the Central Medical Center. I believe the extra detail that equipment will provide me along with the data from the Republic’s biotic experiments will allow me to conclusively determine whether or not your biotic nodes were enhanced using similar methods.”

“And thus indicate whether or not I was actually frozen at the time?” Shepard questioned, looking cautiously interested in the idea.

Tela sighed, she should have expected this turn of events given what they had just learned from Shepard, but this was going to exponentially complicate the security arrangements. “I’ll let the Council know we will be substantially delayed,” she said to the other two Spectres. “Also, C-Sec already has procedures in place in case a prisoner needs to be transferred to the Medical Center, we can use those to transfer her.”

“She will realize she’s being treated as a potential threat and is essentially our prisoner until her identification has been verified and the Council decides what to do with her,” Cesra cautioned, “I thought we were avoiding that if possible?”

Tela studied the human in the monitor, “I think she already suspects it, so verifying it won’t make much of a difference. But we can ease up on our treatment of her, that should help alleviate any sense of isolation or estrangement she may feel over it.”
Her concern responded to, Cesra inclined her head in agreement, “Then I’ll go speak to Lt. Duvidos about arranging the transfer to Central Medical.”
If Shepard hadn't been certain before of her status, being walked through the enclosed and heavily guarded shuttle bay in her light blue examination onesie and laboratory coat to cover it to the C-Sec prisoner transport that waited to take her and her three Spectre guards to the medical center certainly made it very clear that she should probably be very thankful she wasn’t actually in cuffs and wearing a biotic suppressor at the moment. On the other hand, Spectres Vasir, M’Tara and Vania seemed much friendlier now than they had before, and although they were obviously guarding her, were behaving less like guards and more like escorts. That pretty much confirmed in Shepard’s mind that they had indeed been watching and listening in on her conversation with Dr. T’Rani and were now at least somewhat convinced of her identity. Shepard couldn’t really blame the Council for their caution and doubt, had the situation been reversed and she were dealing with someone who had been declared KIA two years ago and were now associated with a terrorist group, she would have come down on the side of caution as well.

As the four of them settled into the back of the prisoner transport and one of the C-Sec personnel shut and locked the doors, Shepard noticed something else that was different from before about the three asari. In the confines of the vehicle the three asari were so close that their auras overlapped with her own and with each other’s. This had happened before of course, but now their auras felt very different than they had when she had first met them. Honestly it was the first time she had felt anything like it outside of her Prothean memories. Before, their auras had felt discordant and irritating against her aura, even subtly threatening at times. Now though, their auras felt harmonic with her own aura. Having them overlap her own didn’t make her feel subtly threatened by them, rather the opposite really as she could feel herself relaxing ever so slightly.

Shepard closed her eyes for a moment to better focus on the difference. She could still clearly identify each aura as auras were very unique per person, exactly why the Protheans had used them for identification purposes, but now it was as if someone had shifted the pitch of the chords of a song up or down the scale. Shepard knew her aura had not changed so she felt safe in assuming the three asari were doing this intentionally, both now with the harmonizing and earlier with the discordance.
They had been purposefully irritating her, keeping her off-balance and uncomfortable. They had probably done it just to see how she would react to it. See if she would make any mistakes, and it had worked. They had thrown her off balance earlier and managed to keep her there with their reminders about the amount of time left before her meeting with the Council and rushing her along in getting ready for her scan. Assholes, she thought with mixed annoyance and admiration. Then her lips curled in a small grin, she would have to keep that aura trick in mind - provided she could replicate the effect. From Thalion and Lindariel’s memories she knew how to do it, but wasn’t certain she could actually manage it. Altering your aura in such a manner wasn’t at all the same as modulating a mass effect field like she had done on the prison ship to crack the glass window.

Still though, could she do it? Now the question was nagging at her, she had the memories of how to do it and had been practicing with extending her aura during her classes with Miranda, Jack and Jacob. What she didn’t have was a Prothean amplifier for a non-Prothean however, and she knew she might not be able to shift her aura without one. Further dipping into Lindariel’s memories over the last few days to develop training courses for her ground team had teased out more information about the unique amplifiers. Prothean amplifiers required a very long surgery to properly implant the various components into the body. Secondary amplifier nodes had to carefully be implanted around her eezo nodules and then thin bio-amplifier strands were run from the primary amplifier at the base of the skull to each of the secondary amplifiers. Between the two, this created a secondary neural fiber network which supplemented the biotics ability to generate dark energy from their eezo nodules and granted them the ability to finely control the mass effect fields generated from that dark energy as well as allowing them to have voluntary control over their own bio-electrical fields or aura. In essence, it attempted to duplicate as closely as possible the way Protheans, and by happenstance the Asari, controlled their biotics. It would not give her the ability to meld like an asari or read things by touching them the way a prothean could, as that also involved specific chemical receptors in the skin, but it would allow her to interact with Prothean technology and might possibly give her the ability to have some control in a meld.

“What are you doing?” Vasir’s voice broke into her thoughts, not exactly sounding suspicious, but… maybe hinting at it.

“Paying attention to my aura,” Shepard responded, her eyes still closed.

“And what are you feeling?” the curious voice of the next speaker was deeper, Spectre M’Tara.

Shepard took a moment to consider her answer then decided to just be honest, “Intentional harmony instead of intentional discordance.” She opened her eyes to see Vasir smirking at her, not at all disagreeing with her assessment or even trying to hide it.

“I’m sure you understand our caution until we can confirm your identity, but we also did not want you to feel alienated because of it,” M’Tara explained to her and for once the tall asari’s lavender eyes were serious instead of teasing.

“And since you can’t change yours we changed ours,” Vanis chimed in; it was obvious she did not mean anything bad by it, but still it rankled a bit.

“It’s nothing against your abilities, Shepard,” Vasir explained with a sigh, “it’s just that your physiology doesn’t permit you to alter your aura.”

Oh really, Shepard thought, and in the back of her mind she heard Thalion’s voice murmuring about arrogant asari thinking they were the only ones capable of such a thing. Without another thought as to the actual wisdom of what she was about to try, Shepard settled into her seat and began a meditative breathing pattern. She felt the transport lift and knew they must have gotten their clearance to leave for the medical center then pushed it from her mind as she concentrated on the ocean like roll
of her breaths. She focused, both inward and on her aura, feeling every nuance of it. Then she attempted one of Lindariel’s lessons. Shepard had moment of triumph and elation as she felt her aura shift, and then pain shattered her concentration. She bent forward and cupped her head in her hands as she groaned in pain at the sudden splitting headache, one that was much worse than what she had suffered on the turian prison ship.

“She actually managed to shift her aura,” Cesra sounded stunned, “but how…?”

“Yes, she did,” Vasir growled sounding both angry and concerned, “how wonderful for her, provided she didn’t permanently injure herself doing it.” Shepard heard the asari activate her omni-tool and begin scanning her.

“How did you even know how to do it?” the question came from Cesra.

“She probably shouldn’t answer that question here,” M’Tara broke in with a timely reminder and there was an intensity to her deep voice that told Shepard the tall asari was probably observing her very intently.

Shepard nodded her head then moaned pitifully at the stupidity of the move, “No, probably I shouldn’t,” she murmured over the nausea the unwise movement had elicited.

She heard Vasir sigh above her, then the feel of an armored hand on the back of her head. “Be still maiden,” the asari matron admonished her as the asari placed her other hand over Shepard’s where they pressed into her forehead, “the last thing any of us wants is for you to be sick in here.” A moment later Shepard felt a slight tingling sensation along the skin of her head and an immediate easing of her nausea. Instinctively she tried to sense what the asari was doing to cause this effect and in the next second the matron ordered her in a no-nonsense tone, “Do not aura sense.”

Shepard immediately stopped, besides she had realized from the immediate stabbing of pain behind her eyes that it was an incredibly bad idea even before Vasir even said anything. A memory rose in her mind of Lindariel doing this for one of her students who hadn’t yet received their implant and she recognized the biotic technique as the same one Tela was utilizing now. “Thank you,” she said as she began her meditative breathing again, knowing this would assist with the pain relieving technique which was called Nestaidhor, in Prothean.

“This should at least alleviate your symptoms enough so you can walk out of here instead of us carrying you maiden,” the nais commented dryly.

Shepard sighed, noting she was firmly back to being a maiden again. Not that she could blame Vasir, that hadn’t been one of her brightest ideas. “I appreciate it.” She definitely didn’t want to give the C-Sec personnel escorting them any more to gossip about than they had already. By the time they arrived at their destination, she wasn’t feeling well by any stretch of the imagination, but she was recovered enough to at least manage a facade of wellness. Enough so she could fool any watchers on the way to wherever Dr. T’Rani was waiting for them. Shepard squared her shoulders and strode out of the transport with the three asari Spectres once they landed and were cleared to exit. She even kept up a light banter with them as they strode though empty hallways on their way to where Dr. T’Rani was waiting for them. As soon as they entered the room and the door closed behind them however, Shepard dropped the act she had been keeping up and clasped her head in her hands with a pained whimper at the pounding in it.

Dr. T’Rani let out a shocked sound, “What is wrong with her?”

“Biotic overexertion,” M’Tara answered before anyone else could, “and no unfortunately we can’t share exactly what she did, but you should probably take a look at her. Make sure she didn’t do
herself any damage.”

Shepard heard no reply for a few seconds, then a displeased sounding, “Very well,” from Dr. T’Rani. The blue hued doctor came over to her, wrapped one arm around her waist and guided her over to the examination bed. She asked for someone to turn down the lights as she helped Shepard out of the laboratory coat covering the examination jumper and when the room was darkened had Shepard lie down upon it. “I’m going to perform a quick scan on you now just to make sure you didn’t do any damage, and then move you to the sterile room where we will do the more advanced scanning and take the needed cellular samples for testing. You’ll be under sedation for that,” Shepard made a noise of protest, and the doctor rushed to assure her, “don’t worry it’s not one that will leave you groggy afterward, but there are twenty samples that need to be taken. The process will not be painless and I need you to remain completely still while we are taking them.”

Twenty samples, Shepard thought incredulously, what the…? Surely last time five had done? “You’re going to turn me into a pincushion doctor,” she quietly complained not wanting to worsen her headache by being any louder.

“I’m trying not to turn you into a pincushion,” Dr. T’Rani responded with hint of sternness, “which is why I need you to remain completely still for it and for that you need to be relaxed and unconscious so you don’t struggle or even tense against the stasis field we will be placing over you.”

“Alright,” Shepard said holding her hands up in the air above her in submission as she lay on her back on the table. It didn’t really sound like she wanted to be awake for this anyway, she thought over the pounding in her head, and if she were lucky, maybe this overexertion headache would be gone as well when she woke. Dr. T’Rani finished her scan of her implant a few minutes later and assured her that despite the intensity of her headache she had actually done no lasting damage to either it or herself. That said though, the doctor strongly cautioned her against trying whatever she had done for a second time. Shepard had no problem following that advice, her headache was only now starting to decrease in intensity. A few minutes later they wheeled Shepard down a very bright hallway that had her laying her hands over her eyes to keep the light from making her head hurt worse and then into the sterile room. Shortly after that the doctor placed an IV drip into the back of her hand and then she knew nothing more as she slipped away into unconsciousness.

When Shepard woke some undetermined time later curled up on her side in her favorite sleeping position it was to the feel of someone brushing their hand over the short quarter inch fuzz of her hair. She remained still with her eyes still closed as she pondered the sensation. Who and why? Someone not wearing armor, or at least not on their hands, for why would you bother with gauntlets on? A moment later she decided she didn’t really care as it actually felt rather soothing. Her headache was gone, there was a blanket over her body so she was warm, the surface underneath her was comfortable, so it seemed like a good moment to center herself in preparation for what would come next. Her meeting with the Council.

She heard the door open a few minutes later. “What are you doing?” the bemused sounding tenor voice was definitely Spectre M’Tara.

“Playing with her hair,” the voice responding so matter-of-factly to the question Shepard identified as Spectre Vanis. “I’m used to it feeling soft and silky, but hers is so short it stands straight up. It’s like nothing else I’ve touched before, still very soft though.”

There was the sound of footsteps approaching, unarmored ones, Shepard frowned a bit in confusion at the realization. “You realize she’s awake right,” M’Tara commented from above her, now sounding amused.

“Yes,” Vanis replied, “but she didn’t say anything, so I figured she didn’t mind.”
Shepard couldn’t help the small snort of amusement that escaped at that, and then she felt another hand on her head. Really, both of them now? Realizing that meditation was just not going to happen at the moment, Shepard opened her eyes and glanced upward out of the corner of her eye at the two asari. Her eyes widened in surprise at seeing that they were no longer in armor, but wearing the Spectre dress uniform Vanis had brought her to wear earlier. M’Tara’s she noticed immediately had about twice as much silver piping on it than the one Vanis was wearing, which also looked like the jacket Vanis had brought for her to wear. Shepard wondered, were there Spectre ranks among themselves?

“Mmm,” M’Tara purred in that dangerous tenor voice as she slowly brushed her fingers in a suggestive arc around Amanda’s ear. “You are right it does feel quite different,” the tall asari’s lavender eyes danced in amusement as the nais smirked down at her and Shepard knew it was definitely time to get up before M’Tara took her lack of objection as permission to escalate her teasing.

Before she could though she heard the door open once again and she tilted her head to see who was joining them. “What is this?” of course it was Spectre Vasir, also now dressed in a uniform with as much piping as Spectre M’Tara’s and carrying a stack of long thin boxes tucked under one arm. The long blue hood over her crests which draped down behind her reminded Shepard somewhat eerily of Matriarch Benezia’s dress. The matron stared at them quizzically, “Play with her hair later, get her dressed now,” she directed them. Right the Council, Shepard thought as she pushed herself upright. As Dr. T’Rani had promised she didn’t feel sluggish or thick headed at all, only like she’d had a nice nap.

“Your uniform’s behind the dressing curtain,” Spectre Vanis informed her as she waved one purple hand to indicate the direction. Shepard turned her head to look behind her, there was an actual opaque screen there. It seemed she was trusted enough now to get dressed without them keeping their Mark I eyeballs on her. That meant that…she was she… She felt almost a dizzying sense of relief as a subtle fear she had carried around with her ever since she awoke, but had kept pushed down, even within her own mind, was conclusively disproven.

She heard a sigh and looked up, all three asari were watching her. “You were worried you might actually be a clone?” Spectre Vasir inquired of her.

“I…” she took in a breath, “it didn’t seem outside the realm of possibility,” she admitted.

“Well, you’re not,” Vasir responded, “now go and get dressed Spectre Amanda Shepard.” There was a subtle, but meaningful, emphasis on her name. “You don’t want to delay your meeting with the Council for a second time.” The last had a bit of a warning tone to it.

Shepard took that to mean she needed to get dressed as quickly as possible, she levered herself off the examination table and headed toward the screen. Behind it was a chair with the uniform laid out for her. There was underwear but no bra, hopefully the skin tight undersuit came with built in support Shepard thought as she started dressing. It took her a few contortions to fasten the high-necked silver undersuit up the back, and then shrug the blue jacket on over it and use the fasteners across the front to secure it around her too thin torso. Finally, she sat down on the chair and pulled on the thigh high silver boots. She picked up the one piece of the uniform left, the blue hood that matched the jacket and stepped out from behind the screen.

“Wait on that maiden,” Vasir directed her as the nais opened one of the boxes and pulled out a distinctive star pendant on a blue ribbon, the bar inscribed with VALOR and star above the larger star denoted that it was an award for a second Star of Terra from the Systems Alliance, one of a very few multiple Star of Terra awards ever awarded to anyone. “No reason not to remind the Council of
what you risked to spare them not only their lives, but also what remained of the Citadel Fleet.” Shepard crossed over to the other Spectre and bent her head so that the nais could slip the ribbon of the award over her head. She now knew what was in at least three of the other boxes, her medals from the Asari Republics, Salarian Union and Turian Hierarchy that they awarded her after the Battle of the Citadel.

“So, the difference in the silver piping on my and Spectre Vanis’s jackets and yours is a sign of rank?” Shepard inquired as Vasir carefully hung the three other medals around her neck.

“Yes,” the matron responded, “your jacket is for Spectre rank, ours is for Senior Spectre rank.” The matron pulled the hood out of Shepard’s hand when she was done with the last award, slipping it over her head and making sure it hung properly. Then she opened the last box, revealing a rather expensive looking omni-bracelet. “This contains your re-activated identification credentials,” she said as Shepard took it out of the box and fastened it around her left wrist. “Congratulations your officially not dead anymore,” the nais said dryly then took one last look all of them, making sure everyone was ready, “alright, let’s get moving.” As they exited the examination room Vasir glanced over at Shepard who was walking beside her, “What exactly did Spectre Kyrik tell you about the Spectres.”

“Not much really,” Shepard responded as they walked down the hallway, “we were about to transit to Eden Prime by the time he informed me I was under consideration. As soon as we transited, we got the distress message about the attack. So really nothing besides the fact that I was and he was going to be my mentor and evaluator.”

“And afterward?” Vasir questioned, “once they inducted you?”

Shepard glanced over at the matron, wondering what this was actually all about, but willing to go along for now. “Well the medical guys corralled me on the way out of the ceremony,” she responded, “then after I finished with my medical examination and identification processing I went searching for the equipment store Anderson mentioned to me in C-Sec.” They passed though the double sliding doors at the end of the hallway to the outside of the Medical Center and while there were still a few C-Sec officers hanging around there was no prisoner transport. Instead an expensive looking asari made air car awaited them. Vasir waved her omni-tool toward it and the four doors unlocked and swung silently upward making it clear who owned it. “Found it,” Shepard said as she followed the nais’s directions to take the front passenger seat while M’Tara and Vanis took the rear seats, “stood there while the turian officer in charge of it pretended not to know I was a Spectre, then got sticker shock once he finally opened them up and left.”

“Spectre level gear is rather expensive,” Cesra Vanis agreed with her, “and then there’s the additional cost of modifying it to suit you.” Shepard wondered for a moment if she might be able to access those stocks again once she finished speaking to the Council, but then thought about how much attention such gear was likely to draw to the team out in the Terminus and immediately decided against the idea. They would be better off modifying a more common piece of gear with advanced parts than carrying around something so unique looking.

“And otherwise?” Tela Vasir inquired once they were in the air, “you seemed to operate fairly well as a Spectre while you tracked down Saren.”

Shepard glanced over at the Senior Spectre with a slight frown, what was behind this line of questioning? “I looked for what I could find out on the Extranet about the duties and responsibilities and limits of our authority,” she admitted after a moment. She sighed, “I probably should have figured out who specifically to ask but…” she considered how to phrase it, “there was a lot of behind the scenes politicking I didn’t want to get involved in at the time that kept me from taking that route.”
Namely she had become quite aware of how closely certain members of the Systems Alliance military and government were watching her and monitoring her actions. It seemed that as soon as she became a Spectre and brought in some non-human specialists her loyalty, which up until then had never been questioned, was suddenly under scrutiny.

“I see…” Vasir responded after a moment, and Shepard suspected that the nais did have an idea of what she was carefully not mentioning.

She turned her head to gaze out the window, no as soon as she took Garrus, Tali’Zora and Wrex on board she had gotten a taste of what things would be like if she didn’t jump to and obey Ambassador Udina’s every whim for what he obviously thought would be his personal pet Spectre. She had put in what she thought was a routine requisition for food and medical supplies for them and had it denied. Their presence had not been requested by the Alliance, was the reply, therefore the Alliance was not responsible for funding or supporting them in any manner. Technically she supposed Dr. Chakwas hadn’t been supposed to provide them medical care either, but the good doctor never once refused them care of any nature. That had been the start of the original Normandy Fund, she had needed credits to buy food and medicine for Garrus, Tali’Zora and Wrex, and then later gear for herself and the team because the regular Alliance issue gear simply wasn’t sufficient given their mission. She had been determined to maintain her independence from Udina and not bow to his pressure to get rid of the non-humans on her team, but at the same time she hadn’t wanted to provoke him by openly seeking the Council’s guidance and authority over his own. The mission had to take precedence over everything and the last thing she had needed at the time was open warfare between Udina and his allies in the Alliance and herself when she was dependent on the Normandy and her crew to successfully complete it.

The air car started to descend and Shepard saw that they were near the Citadel Tower. Shepard watched curiously as Vasir guided the vehicle toward a guarded and sealed parking garage, stopped for their identities to be scanned and then proceeded inside when the guard opened the blast doors for them to enter. She had never approached the Tower by air before, only on foot. Spectre’s had a reserved parking area, Shepard took note of the area as they exited Vasir’s air car, thought she suspected it would be a very long time before she might ever make use of the information. “This way,” Vasir indicated a nearby elevator. Once there, they had to present their identifications yet again for the Tower’s guards to send down the elevator for them. Even with all the security precautions the elevator still only went up to the lowest level of the Council floors. Once they exited it they turned left and came upon the main security checkpoint that separated the rest of the Tower from the area where the Council and its staff were located. The guards at the staff entrance were obviously expecting them, for though Shepard got some intensely curious looks from the turian and asari on duty they passed her through the checkpoint without questioning her newly resurrected identity.

Shepard looked around curiously as the continued forward, this area had still been under construction the last time she was here after the attack on the Tower to dislodge Sovereign from it. She looked around, this part at least looked much as she recalled it from before the attack. Which was a bit odd, one might have thought they would take the opportunity to change things up a little but apparently not. “Things look about the same,” she commented, fishing for a bit more information.

Spectre Vasir, who was walking beside her nodded, “The Keepers began repairing the damage and putting things back into place as soon as the area was cleared. Since the Council was busy with other things at the time, I believe they just decided to replace what was here instead of soliciting for an extensive remodeling.”

That made sense, decided Shepard, and speaking of Keepers she wondered what had ever become of that salarian Chorban and his volus partner Jahleed and the data she had collected for him. Perhaps
she should try and look him up while she was on the Citadel. Later though, she thought noticing the group of Alliance military personnel that awaited them up ahead and who was leading them. Udina, her eyes briefly narrowed on the man, and the thought drifted though her mind that she could easily tear the bastard apart with her biotics now for his traitorous back stabbing of her. Out of corner of her eye she saw Vasir’s hooded head turn toward her, see the asari’s nostrils flare as the nais scented the air. The realization of what the asari Spectre was doing broke her out of her angry thoughts, she took in a breath and tamped down on her acute dislike of the toadying man. In truth the strength of it was a bit disturbing, she certainly didn’t like Udina, but she didn’t recall actively fantasizing about killing him before now. With her memory the way it was it seemed like she would recall something like that, which meant…Thalion, her mind identified the influence. No, he did not like those who acted out of personal selfishness and advancement over their duty to the Empire, or in this case the safety of the entire Galaxy. As they approached the small group Shepard caught Udina’s stare at her asari Spectre uniform and then the slight curling of his upper lip at it and her dislike of him flared anew despite her best efforts to control it.

“Ambassador Udina,” Vasir greeted him before Shepard could, “I was not aware you were invited to this meeting of the Council.”

The man drew himself stiffly upright, “I am not,” he answered her, “I thought it would be polite of us to relive you and escort our newly returned Spectre to her meeting with the Council.”

“That is kind, but unnecessary of you,” the Senior Spectre smoothly responded, “the Council entrusted us with her escort, therefore we will escort her the entire way to the meeting chamber.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Udina tried again to persuade her, “I’m sure you have better things to do than continue to escort Commander Shepard now that her identity has been accepted.”

‘One is named by one’s highest rank,’ Shepard swore she heard Lindariel’s voice murmur in her ear in her haughtiest tone. Her eyes narrowed briefly as she realized what he was attempting. As an Ambassador he wielded quite a bit of influence in the Systems Alliance government, especially compared to a mere Commander, something he had used to make her life very difficult during her hunt for Saren when she didn’t obey his every whim. Here he was trying to do it once again. Still though, did she really want to take that step just yet? Did she really want to leave the Alliance military and become only a Spectre? She quickly weighted her options, then went for the middle ground. “Spectre Shepard actually Ambassador,” she corrected him, her voice carefully neutral. “I have yet to be reinstated in the Systems Alliance Navy…and, provided the Council decides to uphold my rank as Spectre, I believe that would be considered a higher rank than Commander no matter what happens with my commission.”

“Indeed,” Spectre Vasir broke into the conversation, “especially since Spectre’s are not permitted to hold an active rank in their respective militaries due to the inherent conflict of interest between their duties to their member governments and duties to the Council.”

What? Shepard whipped her head around to stare at the asari standing next to her only to find Vasir was staring challenging back at her. Then after a moment the nais’s gaze shifted past her and she followed it - to Udina. The Ambassador was not nearly as good an actor as he might hope, for the truth was written upon his face. Suddenly all the questions Vasir had been asking her and the odd moment when Spectre Vanis had brought her the uniform she was now wearing, made sense to her. The three asari Spectres had been trying to catch her out with the uniform, but then she hadn’t responded at all as they had expected her to respond to it. Once they had decided she actually didn't know, Vasir had gone hunting to figure out what information she did have and how she had obtained it. Now…the bastard, her gaze narrowed angrily on him. He had known about this and had purposefully kept it from her. He had kept it from Admiral Hackett and Captain Anderson as well,
she realized, because it just didn’t make sense to completely ignore the Council about this requirement - not when it was something that would jeopardize the status of the System Alliance’s first Spectre. Or…her anger shifted to fury, maybe he intended to use this to get rid of her, claim she had known all along, but had ignored it, thus giving the Council a reason to revoke her Spectre status. All because she hadn’t bowed to his every whim and desire. ‘You should break every bone in the traitor’s body, leave him screaming on the floor as an example to others of what happens to those who betray their oaths to serve,’ Thalion’s voice advised her.

“Your…escort is not needed Ambassador Udina,” Spectre M’Tara spoke up from behind them as she placed a very firm hand on Shepard’s shoulder, “perhaps you and those with you should return to your embassy.” Her tone made it clear that it was less of a suggestion and more of an order.

Anger and spitefulness filled his expression as his gaze fixed on Shepard, “You’ll regret this,” he spat at her. He whirled and stomped back through the military escort behind him while snarling at them to follow him. The Lieutenant in charge of them stared back and forth between the four Spectres and the Ambassador for a moment in confusion then shook his head and motioned for his men to follow him as they trailed the ambassador back to the Systems Alliance Embassy.

Shepard stared after them, the surge of fury she had felt giving way to a much more chaotic mix of emotions and thoughts as it sunk in that she would be leaving the Alliance military whether she wanted to or not. Of course, that was provided the Council affirmed her continued Spectre status. Which was not a given, especially now that she realized she had been in violation of the Council’s rules all along. Why in the hell hadn’t they inquired why she still held her commission during her hunt for Saren or even afterward? They had a perfect opportunity after the Battle of the Citadel. As for Udina’s threat, at least she already had a good idea about who his backers were in the Alliance military…the problem was they were all prime candidates to back Cerberus as well. Oh well, she thought with bitter mirth, it wasn’t like she wasn’t fairly certain TIM was ultimately out to eliminate her once she fulfilled her part in his plan anyway.

Spectre M’Tara’s vice-like grip on her shoulder eased as the taller asari stepped closer to her. “It’s not advised, even for a Spectre, to attack one of your own governmental members,” the nais murmured next to her head, “at least not until the Council has investigated this and made their decision what will happen to him.”

“You really had no idea, did you?” Vasir inquired, her brown-eyed gaze shrewdly evaluating her.

Shepard shook her head, “No, otherwise,” she sighed as she admitted, “I might have told Nihlus that I wasn’t really interested in becoming one.”

Unexpectedly, Vasir smiled at her, “That is part of what the mentorship is about, giving both you and your evaluator time to decide whether or not being a Spectre is right for you.”

“Technically you had six months to complete the process…,” Spectre M’Tara commented next, “with Dr. T’Rani’s evidence you can probably make a case for an extension of that time.”

Shepard snorted, “You think death then would make a fairly good excuse for my tardiness?”

“It’s definitely worth a try,” the tall asari sounded amused, briefly placing both hands on her shoulders and squeezing in a reassuring manner. “Now we should get moving, the Council is probably already gathered.”

“So, let’s pick up the pace so no one else tries to stop us,” Spectre Vanis advised, “because we’re gathering too much attention after that confrontation.”
“Mmm,” Spectre Vasir, murmured as she casually glanced behind them, “let’s get moving.”

As they proceeded down the hallway, Thalion’s voice intruded into Shepard’s thoughts once again. However, this time the Prothean didn’t advocate violence, but offered wisdom, ‘Be aware of the war, but keep your focus on the battle in front of you.’

Sage advice, realized Shepard, she needed to focus, to get control of her emotions again before stepping in front of the Council. Udina and what he had done could wait unless the Council decided to address the matter. Her focus needed to be on persuading them to let her continue pursuing the Collectors, assist with her operating in League space, and preparing to stop Cerberus from accessing the Omega 4 relay once she found safe passage through it.

They passed though yet another security checkpoint before Spectre Vasir announced, “Here we are,” as she stopped in front of double sliding doors with a ‘Conference Room 345’ sign beside them.

Vasir turned toward her, looked her up and down, then dipped her head. “I am not certain whether it is best to wish you well in your desire to pursue your duty or wish that you stay here so that one of us can properly mentor you,” the matron admitted. “So, stars guide you on your journey maiden.”

“Indeed,” Spectre M’Tara stepped forward, “you do not even realize how little you know of what you should know to properly be a Spectre. Either of us would be pleased to mentor you, but we cannot with you working with Cerberus.”

Spectre Vanis came forward to stand beside Vasir, but she didn’t say anything, just glanced between her two fellow asari Spectres and then at Shepard questioningly.

“I’ll hold you to that offer,” Shepard responded to the tall asari, all the while hoping the Reapers would give her that sort of time, “but I must do this first. I cannot desert my people and leave them to whatever fate the Collectors plan for them,” she explained and then challenged, “Would you really want me as a Spectre if I could?”

Neither of the Senior Spectre’s answered only looked resigned to her response and Shepard suspected they had not really expected her to take them up on it.

“Amanda,” Spectre Varis finally spoke, “break a leg in there.”

It was so unexpected that for one moment Shepard just stared at the maiden, and then she laughed, “Thank you, Cesra, and I can tell whose been hanging around humans the most now.”

The appalled gazes of the other two asari faded into confusion at her response. Vasir shook her head slightly, “Very well, are you ready Spectre Shepard?”

At Shepard’s nod the nais waved her omni-tool over the sensor panel. The doors slid open to reveal Council Anderson waiting on her in person while the three other Councilors were only present by hologram. Shepard lifted her chin and squared her shoulders, then she resolutely stepped inside the room.
“Shepard,” Anderson greeted her as she approached, his dark eyes searching but also seeming somehow lost as to what to say next.

Shepard withheld her sigh, she could guess at the information he had recently received from Dr. T’Rani. Though the other Spectres hadn’t discussed any of the results with her, it was clear that the asari doctor had not only confirmed her identity, but also found evidence to back up her statements of what had happened to her. The changes in her memory, and the experiments with increasing her biotic abilities. “Councilor Anderson,” before the incident out in the hallway with Udina and what she had just learned she might have saluted him just as a reminder of their shared background. Now though, she settled for respectful nod and an earnest, “It is good to see you again Sir.”

She glanced over toward the holograms of the other Councilors only to see that Tevos and Valern were reading something on their omni-tools while Councilor Sparatus was watching the two of them, his mandibles tight to his face in an expression of distaste. A flash of hostility arose as she recalled the speech he had made dismissing her ‘interpretation’ of the beacons messages, she clamped down on it though, willing her expression to remain calm as she nodded to him and then returned her attention to Anderson. She had a guess as to what Tevos and Valern were reading, and as she glanced at Anderson’s omni-bracelet she saw that it was flashing. “You might want to look at that Sir,” she nodded toward it, “I had an unexpected…and interesting meeting with Ambassador Udina on the way to this meeting.”

He stiffened at that, a brief expression of wariness flashing across his face before he said with a disgusted sigh, “Udina.” He lifted his arm, “I can guess what this might be,” he commented as he activated it and began reading.

Shepard remained silent, digesting his response. He was the Alliance’s Councilor now, and had access to much more information than he had in the past when she had been made a Spectre. It was entirely possible he knew what Udina had done, or at least suspected it. Since Udina was still present, either he hadn’t had enough proof to risk the backlash from Udina’s supporters in the government and military, or had simply chosen not to push the matter for the same reason she had chosen not to reach out to the Council to get the information - unwillingness to risk that backlash for the perceived level of gain. She had been dead after all and any successor he would be able to make
sure didn’t face the same issues…or at least faced less of them. Now though here she was alive again, and the issue forced, of all things, by Udina himself.

After a few minutes the conference room doors opened again, and Senior Spectres Vasir and M’Tara entered the room. This was unexpected, thought Shepard, especially since they had clearly said their goodbyes in the hallway. She inclined her head to them as they did the same as they walked up to stand on either side of her. Shepard stifled an irritated sigh, feeling height disadvantaged between them, especially by Spectre M’Tara who was almost a good third of a meter taller. At least their auras were still harmonious with her own, an invisible signal of reassurance to her by them and one they intended to make since it took an effort to do and maintain. A ripple in the aura to her left, had her turning her head toward M’Tara, looking up to meet inquisitive lavender eyes. Ah, Shepard looked up, turned her head and looked up at Vasir, then turned back to M’Tara with an aggrieved expression.

The tall Senior Spectre’s lips tightened as the amusement in her eyes grew, the nais leaned over toward her and whispered, “Shall I find you something to stand on?”

A slight clearing of a throat had them both straightening to look at Councilor Anderson who gave them a bemused look before he turned back toward the holograms of the other Councilors. They were apparently done with their reading, and were now all paying attention to her…and had, of course, seen the little aside with M’Tara. Tevos in particular was watching them rather intently though Shepard couldn’t tell from her expression if she were pleased, displeased or simply observing their interaction.

“Shall we begin of with the recent discovery that the Alliance did not forward the data file we sent them for Spectre Shepard, or with her unexpected reappearance and the intriguing results of Dr. T’Rani medical examination,” Councilor Valern jumped right into it, apparently not interested in dancing around…well anything.

From the expressions of the other Councilor’s they had not expected it either, yet it was Councilor Sparatus who recovered first. “Let us start with the Alliances withholding of the data file. I for one want to know why it occurred, and why Commander Shepard did not come forward when she suspected she had not been received all of the information she should have received from the Council.” Sparatus pointed challengingly toward Shepard, “What were these politics you referred to and how did they affect your mission?”

Shepard did not immediately respond, instead taking a moment to think about her reply. Before she could speak however Councilor Anderson stepped forward, “The same ones that I didn’t want to unnecessarily make enemies of when I became aware of the fact that the Council had sent a data file and that to my knowledge Shepard had not received it. If I may remind the Council of the fact that you chose to let the Alliance have sole support of Spectre Shepard’s mission to track down and stop Spectre Saren, one of your most decorated Spectre’s. That effectively meant that Shepard could not afford to make an enemy of Ambassador Udina, the Alliance’s representative to the Council, or she would risk the success of her mission.”

Sparatus jumped on the admission, “Are you saying that your own government, who in their own words accused the Council of failing to sufficiently defend their colonies would then turn around and risk those same colonies over the feelings of one individual? Since apparently your colonies mean so little to you, was the Alliance being intentionally deceptive in their dealings with the Council?”

“No,” Shepard interrupted, “he is not saying that, since I do not think Udina would have let anything stand in the way of the success of that mission. Yet consider this from Udina’s point of view, all he would have had to do is claim that he handed the file over to me and that I had failed to meet the
requirements of the Council to get rid of a Spectre whom he considered difficult and not receptive enough to his demands. You would have revoked my Spectre status for non-compliance and he would have been free to suggest a new applicant who would be more amiable to his suggestions.”

“Amenable how?” Valern questioned.

Shepard directed her attention to the salarian Councilor’s hologram, “One that didn’t recruit non-humans and then insist that they stay over his objections for one. For another, one that let him micro-manage his or her missions and keep him filled in on the smallest details of what was going on, even those things that the Council decided to classify above his level of clearance to know.” That had torqued Udina’s ass when she had refused to answer some of his questions about what had occurred on Feros. It had also been when she knew for certain that someone aboard the ship was his mole, instead of just suspecting it. Fortunately, whomever it was not on the ground team, but one of the Alliance personnel on the ship so they knew something about mind controlling spores they hadn’t known exactly what had produced them other than it being a plant which was destroyed by the ground team. They hadn’t known that the plant in question was intelligent and called itself a Thorian, or the fact that they found one of Benezia’s Commandos who had been given to the Thorian, or about the Cipher that Shiala had transferred to her mind.

The salarian Councilor blinked once as he thoughtfully tapped his lips, “Yes,” Valern admitted, “I can see how he might have thought that would work. He had objections then before you were inducted as a Spectre?”

Shepard inclined her head, “He did not like me working so closely with C-Sec, in the form of the assistance of then Detective Garrus Valkarian, in tracking down information about Saren’s involvement in the attack on Eden Prime immediately prior to my induction.”

Anderson made an aggrieved sound, “I can vouch for that, he was very vocal about it. I think everyone in the office knew that he thought you should have cut Valkarian out the moment you got a solid lead instead of reaching out to bring him in on it.”

Shepard snorted, “He was very vocal, as you say, to me about it as well and did not like the fact that I essentially ignored him about it. He badly wanted the credit given for it to go solely to Alliance.”

“Why did you ignore him?” the unexpected question came from Councilor Tevos.

Pure curiosity? Something else? Shepard couldn’t even guess given the asari matriarch’s even expression. “Because I knew Detective Valkarian, then Tali’Zora nar Rayya and Urdnot Wrex all had knowledge, experiences and viewpoints that were substantially different from both mine and from my crew,” Shepard gave the asari Councilor the same answers she had Udina, only she hoped this time it would be given more consideration than he had given it two years ago. “They would be able to give me options for problems that might otherwise never be considered without their presence and would already have valuable experience in implementing those options. I felt their presence on my team gave me not only added adaptability, but also made available sources of intelligence I would not have had otherwise, and increased my chances of success in tracking down Saren.” She drew in a breath, “Plus, I was aware of how much attention was being paid to the mission and felt it was an excellent opportunity to show the other races of the Citadel that we could work with them as well as showing those on Earth who have never met any alien the same.”

“A well throughout answer,” noted Valern.

“It’s the same one I gave Udina that he ignored, that didn’t and still doesn’t make it untrue,” Shepard defended her response.
“Indeed,” the salarian responded mildly, “I wasn’t challenging you, only noting the thought that went into your reply. It is the same reason why our advisory sub-councils are as diverse as possible; many different viewpoints lead to better solutions for problems. As for the other, the xenophobia of Earth’s population is well documented.”

Shepard dipped her head, “Unfortunate, but true. Thus, my effort, however small, to remedy it. As for the other, the benefits of diversity are taught in our leadership courses at the Academy. The courses referred only to diversity among humans, but I didn’t see why it wouldn’t apply in a wider sense and I did gain insight, tactical advice and intelligence from them that I would not have otherwise that greatly contributed to the success of the mission.”

“Diverse teams normally also have divergent ideas and viewpoints, it can make it difficult to maintain a sense of camaraderie among them as a team without strong leadership skills,” Councilor Tevos noted, “that you were able to do so speaks highly of your abilities in that area.”

The praise from the matriarch caught Shepard by surprise. “Thank you,” she dipped her head toward Tevos’s hologram, “it wasn’t easy,” she admitted, “but it was definitely worth it.” No, it hadn’t been easy to get so many strong personalities to work together, especially given the historical animosity between turian and human and turian and krogan. Really, almost no one had initially wanted Garrus on board except for Tali and she.

“That is all very well and good,” Sparatus broke in to their discussion, his tone betraying his irritation with it. “However, going back to what you say Ambassador Udina was doing to pressure you into going along with his wishes. You were someone the Alliance claimed was one of their best, yet you apparently believe that you had so little support or loyalty from your own superiors that Ambassador Udina’s scheming against you would have succeeded. A turian would know that she had the loyalty of the Hierarchy to back her against the word of one Ambassador no matter how well connected,” he challenged her, “are you admitting that the Alliance only wanted a Spectre they controlled, one that held no true allegiance to the Council despite their oath to do so?”

Shepard stared at the smug two-faced bastard at first in disbelief, and then with growing anger and disdain. He had worked hand in glove with Udina to undermine her standing with the Alliance military and make it seem as if she were a complete failure as a Spectre. From early on, she had suspected that the Council had intended her to fail. Then with the steady stream of ‘Council’s complaints about her performance,’ which Udina had copied her on as he forwarded them to the Alliance in an effort to force her into complying with his demands, she had become certain that at least one of them intended her to fail while the other two were apparently content to wait and see if she would sink, swim, or get eaten when they threw her into the middle of the ocean. At least Valern and Tevos hadn’t been throwing chum in the water like Sparatus. The entire mission to track down Saren became a mini-nightmare of alienation, heartache and stress as she had to devote valuable time to securing funding and supplies, which thankfully due to her ‘mercenary’ missions out in the Terminus at least she had some ideas about how to accomplish, and trying to protect herself and her crew from Udina and Councilor Sparatus machinations as they went about methodically destroying her reputation and standing in the Alliance military while she was fighting to keep Saren from destroying the Galaxy.

“I am only saying that when the voices claiming that I was incompetent and failure were so highly placed, that I had every reason to think those claims would be believed over my own as a mid-grade officer and nothing else,” Shepard finally responded in a tone as chill as an arctic wind. She forced herself to bite off the rest of what she wanted to say, chanting ‘you need your Spectre status, you need your Spectre status’ over and over in her mind to remind herself of what was really important here. She had thought this was over after she had been proven right after the Battle of the Citadel, but here he was trying to score points by bringing it up to her face. ‘It did prepare you however for The
Illusive Man’s attempts to control you by taking away Cerberus support,’ part of her mind reminded her. Which she had to admit was true, TIM’s efforts in that area at least were laughable compared to what she went through chasing Saren. She was aware of Anderson and the other Councilors staring at her, even Sparatus seemed taken aback by her response to his statement. The two Spectres on either side of her were standing stiffly as well, doubtless Vasir and M’Tara were wondering what exactly was going on between them. Somehow, she doubted Sparatus treated either of them we way he normally treated her.

Then Anderson’s brown eyes widened, “Udina did copy you on those reports he sent to Alliance Command.”

“Of course he did,” Shepard responded, “he was using them to place more pressure on me.”

“What reports?” Councilor Valern immediately jumped back into the conversation.

“Indeed,” Councilor Tevos came in on the end of the salarian’s statement, “I too wish to know about these reports.” From the tone of her voice she wasn’t pleased at all, with the situation and, Shepard suspected, the growing amount of information Councilor Anderson had apparently kept from his fellow Councilors.

Councilor Anderson stared at them for a brief moment, his face set in careful non-expressive lines. Shepard knew it well, he was considering what to share. That made her suspicious, why hadn’t he already shared this? “The ones where Councilor Sparatus’s confidential diplomatic communications were misrepresented to the Alliance as official communications by the Council detailing Commander Shepard’s poor performance as a Spectre along with Udina’s own comments about how her dismal performance was undermining the Alliance’s reputation and increasing the amount of work he had to do to cover up for her errors and diplomatic missteps. Those reports have all been removed from Shepard’s Alliance records, and in their place is a notice that they contained falsified data, indicating to anyone who previously read it that the information contained within those reports was untrue.”

He paused for a second before continuing, “The reason it was not reported to the Council was that Admiral Hackett and I considered the it an internal matter to the Alliance government. They were notified of Udina’s actions, he was reprimanded and punished, but left in place under supervision to act as my adviser while I learned what I needed to know from him to function as Councilor. He might be untrustworthy in certain situations, notably in promoting his own authority, but not in matters of Alliance interests. Thus, it was judged safe to keep him in place for the time being.”

Shepard let herself have a moment of relief, and yes, a moment too of vindication at the thought of Udina getting at least some of what he deserved for the difficulties he put her through and the damage he tried to do to her reputation and career. It was a very brief moment of victory though, because something just didn’t sound right. What Anderson had said seemed plausible, but honestly it was more likely they would have chosen to quietly removed Udina rather than risk exactly what was happening right now - the rest of the Council finding out about it and not being pleased. Unless…the dreadnoughts, Shepard realized, Anderson and Hackett must have gotten the agreement of Udina’s supporters in the military to back their pressuring of the Assembly for funding in exchange for letting Udina keep his job. That gave them a presence on the inside to keep up with what Anderson was doing, and a voice to express their opinions - and do their will, which was likely what was behind that little scene out in the hallway.

“That seems to have been a miscalculation,” Councilor Valern observed in a dry tone, “given his actions just minutes ago.”

Anderson drew in a deep breath, disgust evident in his expression, “Indeed, I have to wonder what he was thinking confronting Shepard like that, especially in front of three other Spectres as
witnesses.” That was a good point, mused Shepard, why had he done it so openly and then threatened her in addition. It was almost like he wanted to force the issue, but she couldn’t see immediately what he had to gain from it.

“I for one will be placing a formal protest of Ambassador Udina’s actions in passing along confidential diplomatic communications to the Alliance military, Councilor Anderson,” Councilor Sparatus’s growled comment refocused her attention on his hologram, “for misuse of his position to gain access to those documents and then for releasing them without permission. Something he knew was expressly forbidden.”

To Shepard’s surprise, the turian shifted his attention from Anderson to her. "Spectre Shepard," the turian Councilor addressed her, "my comments were never meant to be seen by your military superiors and should have never made their way into your official military records to mar a distinguished military career." Shepard stared at him in bemusement, not having expected any sort of apology from him.

Then Sparatus continued, “I opposed your induction to the Spectres on the grounds that Humanity was not ready for such a position. And that you in particular were not mentally stable enough for such a responsibility after your contact with the Prothean beacon.” Ok, she took it all back, Shepard thought, that hadn’t been an apology at all. That or he had a really poor idea of what an apology should actually sound like.

“Nothing you did persuaded me otherwise, especially with your persistent warnings about ‘Reapers’,” Shepard stared at the turian as he actually air-quoted the word, “a myth used by Saren to control the Geth that was obviously based upon some message in the beacon about the Prothean’s war with the Metacons. One which you mistook as a fact when it fit in with your superstitious beliefs in an upcoming Armageddon.” Shepard’s grey eyes narrowed on him, but she didn’t say anything. After all, it wasn’t like she hadn’t already watched a video of him making these claims. “Due to a lack of factual evidence supporting your claim we have dismissed it,” Sparatus finished with a tone of satisfaction. “The dreadnought present at the Battle of the Citadel was merely an advanced Geth ship and nothing more.”

“Vigil?” she said, referring to the VI on Ilos.

“Unfortunately inoperable by the time we reached Ilos due to a catastrophic power failure,” Anderson responded with a shake of his head.

Shepard scowled, that was very unfortunate, however, “And the fact that it also just happened to match the exact ship outline of the one in the beacon message?”

Sparatus shrugged, “Perhaps the Geth based it on an ancient Metacon ship that they recovered, but nothing more.”

“Nothing more?” She exclaimed, dumbfounded and aghast as she stared at him in disbelief recalling what she had learned from both Thalion and Lindariel’s memories. “Are you...” she stopped, realizing she could go no further with the two other Spectre’s in the room. She shook her head, “You should not dismiss the threat represented by the Metacons, but I can say no further while Spectre’s Vasir and M’Tara are present without your authorization.” She was aware that the two asari on either side of her turned their hooded heads slightly her way before they too returned their attention to the Council and waited for them to respond to her.

“You are referring to what you termed the Cipher,” Councilor Tevos commented, “received from Commando Shiala T’Jrai?”
Ok… that sort of sounded like authorization, Shepard decided, “I am, in the neurological scans Dr. T’Rani performed the Cipher should have showed up as memories in the same location an asari would store memories she received from another.”

The asari Councilor stared at her consideringly for a long moment before responding, “She did mention that in her report. You have positively identified them as such?”

Shepard nodded, “I accessed a memory I believed was from the Cipher while the doctor aboard my ship was scanning and that was the area that activated.”

Tevos gave her a look over her careful phrasing, letting her know it hadn’t gone unnoticed, but only inquired, “What has been the content of these memories?”

Something caused Shepard to hesitate to reveal the true extent of the memories. “Bits and pieces of memory of different protheans,” she replied, which was close to the full truth. “Fortunately for me, the area above where the Thorian grew seems to have been an educational complex.” That seemed to sharpen the asari Councilor’s interest Shepard noticed. “Because quite a few of the more complete memories I have found have been instructional ones, several of which have been in various biotic techniques.”

“Which biotic techniques?” Tevos continued with her questioning.

“Umm,” Shepard decided to just name the off in the order in which she had discovered them, “Advanced barrier techniques, mass effect field sound manipulation, aura sensing, aura training, aura sensing training, general biotic energy conservation techniques, biotic charge, biotic flash step, more advanced barrier training, advanced general biotic energy conservation techniques, general biotic manipulation techniques, the prothean equivalent of susano called thelrhaw, or the resolute body, basic bladed weapon and staff techniques, and basic warp blade techniques.”

“Sound manipulation,” broke in Anderson, “what would you use that for?”

Shepard turned toward him, “Shattering or fracturing materials with a lattice molecular structure.”

His eyes widened for a moment and then a smile tugged at his lips, “Like breaking out a window without activating a few YMIR mechs?”

“Oh,” she realized and then smirked, “heard about that did you, Warden Kuril’s probably still trying to figure out how I managed that one.”

“I notice you mentioned biotic charge and biotic flash step separately?” Councilor Tevos commented as soon as it was clear Shepard was finished replying to Anderson.

She turned toward the hologram of the asari Councilor, smirk fading into a slight frown, “Yes? The biotic charge was from the memories of Senior Instructor Suiadan Ildroun, while the biotic flash step was from the memories of Dragahîr Thalion Elendel.” Shepard frowned, that was odd, she could have sworn she just saw Tevos’ face twitch, but surely it was a flicker of the hologram.

“Spectre Shepard,” Tevos sounded oddly stilted, “that is an exceptionally dangerous technique to perform without having a full understanding of each intermediate step.”

Ah that was it, realized Shepard, and then she was actually touched. Maybe it hadn’t been an act all along and Tevos actually did care a small bit about her, at least as someone technically in her employ. “I have been being very careful with the biotic charge,” she assured the Councilor, “one of Instructor Ildroun’s memories revealed what happened to one of his students when they failed to form the mass effect tunnel properly. I have been being very cautions since then to ensure that I do
all the underlying charge techniques perfectly before actually performing the charge itself.”

“Technique maiden,” Vasir growled from beside her, “not techniques.” Startled, Shepard wiped her head around to look at the asari on her right meeting narrowed brown eyes and a deep scowl head on. Vasir looked quite angry with her, “The flash-step is an advanced charge not a separate technique. Everything you mentioned about being careful in preparing for a biotic charge counts triple for a flash step.”

What? Shepard’s mind was a blank for a moment, the same? It was obvious they were closely related techniques of course, but the same?

Then to her left she heard M’Tara quietly laugh, “I’ve been being careful with charging, but not concerned at all with flash stepping everywhere. Shepard, whatever deity you believe in must have been watching very closely over you.” Shepard turned to give the tall asari a wary look, but M’Tara was actually looking over her at her at Vasir on her other side - annoying. “No Tela,” M’Tara said, “she should go on as she has been, let her continue focusing on the charge, it will naturally have a positive effect on the safety of her flash-step. Trying to go back and train her the way we learned would likely endanger her at this point. The entire point of flash stepping is to understand how to charge so well that it becomes instinctive to perform it correctly with little to no thought or time taken to perform it. If she starts thinking about it because you tell her to then you will be putting her in danger.” The tall Spectre looked down at Shepard, “Go on doing what you have been when flash stepping,” M’Tara directed her, “you obviously have the level of instinctive knowledge required otherwise you simply wouldn’t be able to perform the technique.”

“Alright,” Shepard easily agreed, her thoughts still dealing with the notion that the charge and flash step were one and the same.

“I don’t understand how these memories could have taught her how to flash step at all,” Vasir complained from her other side, “what exactly is this Cipher?”

While she was a bit annoyed over how far afield they were getting from the subject of the Metacons, neverless Shepard quickly gave a condensed version of the events on Feros. The attack of the Geth, the strange behavior of the colonists, their discovery that ExoGeni had intentionally and very illegally exposed them to the Thorian spores to research how they worked. Then the meeting with the Shiala clone the Thorian had used to communicate with them and the eventual break down of discussions followed by the Thorian’s destruction and freeing of Shiala T’Jrai from being its thrall.

“The Cipher she transferred to me was supposed to allow me to think enough like a prothean to actually understand the beacon’s message as something more than disjointed scenes of destruction and gibberish,” Shepard explained, “and after a few weeks I could finally actually understand the complete message. By the time we went to Ilos, I was able to understand the Prothean language well enough to translate an automated message on one of the consoles we found on the surface.”

Shepard hesitated for a moment then continued, “These bits of actual coherent memories though, their entirely new. I certainly didn’t experience the Cipher this way before my death.”

Councilor Valern broke the silence that briefly fell after she finished speaking, “The Council sent Prothean researchers to Feros after the Battle of the Citadel to speak with Shiala T’Jria to obtain more information about the Thorian and the Cipher she transferred to you through a meld as well as gathering more information about the indoctrination effects she reported concerning the Geth dreadnought. Spectres Vasir and M’Tara, you now have access to these files and can read further about the Cipher at your leisure.” That was news to Shepard, it wasn’t surprising though, it wasn’t like the Council had ever spent much time filling her in on their plans. More importantly it was a clear indication that the salarian Councilor felt they had wasted enough of his time in explaining the
Cipher and they should move onto another topic of his choosing. “As for the changes in the Cipher Spectre Shepard, they are likely due to the drell neurochemicals used by Cerberus. The increased LPT Dr. T'Rani noted in the scans might allow you to access the individual memories which made up the Cipher.”

She nodded, “I had considered that as a possibility as well, especially since I’ve noticed that I recall things from the past now that I’m fairly certain I had forgotten.”

“Hmm, interesting,” Valern commented thoughtfully, “however, before we diverted to the topic of biotic techniques you had a comment on the Metacons in response to Councilor Sparatus?”

“While I agree that should be a topic of discussion,” the asari Councilor broke in, “I wish to further discuss these biotic techniques Spectre Shepard has discovered before moving onto that topic.” They broke script, thought Shepard in astonishment, Tevos must really want to know about what she had found out from the Cipher to practically speak over one of the others.

Valern seemed just as surprised. “I am interested as well,” he responded to her, “the techniques Spectre Shepard has discovered from do sound interesting and potentially very useful, but I would suggest that she explains these techniques to Spectre’s Vasir and M’Tara after this meeting. They can record the session for us to review later as well as preparing training for any other Spectres interested in learning the techniques.”

“I can absolutely do that,” Shepard quickly agreed with his suggestion. She really didn’t want to spend another hour or so discussing biotics, as interesting as it was, instead of working the conversation around to the topic she had come to the Citadel to discuss with the Council in the first place.

Tevos didn’t look quite as pleased with the salarian’s suggestion, but then the matriarch turned her attention to the two Spectres standing on either side of Shepard. Upon seeing both incline their heads in agreement, the asari Councilor turned back to Valern, “Very well,” she agreed.

“Good,” he replied, “now with that settled, back to the subject of the Metacons.”

Shepard nodded, “Of the four prothean’s whose memories I have accessed, three of them have memories specific to the Empire’s war with the Metacons. Elder Instructor Lindariel Ealoeth was five hundred and fifteen at the time of her memory, and the war with the Metacons had been going on for her entire lifetime. In fact, when she was young the Empire was losing the war until they began to uplift and incorporate other species to fight against them.” She shifted her attention to Councilor Sparatus’s hologram. “If the Geth have access to Metacon runtimes and technology, then we should not dismiss that possibility as if it were not a potential threat, not when the Metacons almost defeated the Protheans.”

The turian just shook his head, “And again we have nothing but your word for this and your claim of memories from this so-called Cipher. I fail to see how a plant, intelligent or not, could absorb memories from decomposing corpses.”

For once Shepard had to admit he had a point, “That was what Shiala said to me,” she acknowledged, “but I think what may have actually happened is that the Thorian somehow established a mental link with them similar to what it did I with the colonists. That is just a guess however, because I haven’t yet come across any reference to the Thorian at all in the memories.”

“Memories,” he all but sneered, “this just sounds like another attempt to persuade us of your Reaper and Armageddon obsession.” He gestured wildly with one arm, “There is no mysterious enemy out there preparing to destroy us all.”
In that he was spectacularly wrong, Shepard knew, but the turian was bound and determined to disbelieve everything she said on the matter. “Le tulca caul nin alestel (You ceaselessly accuse me of lying),” as if she were looking out through another’s eyes Shepard was aware of the asari on either side of her whirling around and bringing up their barriers, almost humorously startled looks on their faces as Lindariel’s clear, patrician voice rang out in the room, “harya nin alharyasama Edhilr cuina ar thuia lebenmeneg idhrin (claiming that I do not possess the memories of Edhilr who lived and breathed 50,000 years ago). Er nincar…er Lindariel Ealoeth cuina ettelëa lenûr nineitha mintalaf ar alvalda Arnad amhaul ar anno ahyanë arad ialla Edhilr(Yet I do…I Lindariel Ealoeth lived primitive when your race was still scratching in the dirt and was not yet deemed worthy by the Empire to be uplifted and granted the opportunity of one day calling yourselves Edhilr).”

In response, Sparatus growled at her, “Speaking gibberish at me is not going to persuade me of anything other than your growing mental instability!”

“Everyone just calm down,” Anderson ordered, glancing between the turian Councilor, the two asari Spectres and Shepard. “Shepard what was that?” He didn’t look very pleased with her dramatic presentation.

It took Shepard a moment to wrestle control fully back from the elder prothean, to feel as if she were fully back in control over her own body. “Hardly gibberish,” she growled back at Sparatus, “I can speak, read, and write in both Eldalie and the trade language, and I most certainly do possess the very clear memories of four different protheans.” She glared back at the turian, but then found herself distracted by the holograms of Valern and Tevos, both of whom were paying more attention to their omni-tools than the current spat between her and Sparatus.

On either side of her Vasir and M’Tara kept their barriers raised though they seemed less threatened and threatening than they had a moment earlier. “Shepard?” Vasir warily questioned her.

“Vasir?” Shepard mocked her in turn, earning herself a scowl, but really why had they reacted so strongly to her pulling Lindariel’s memory forward to speak in Prothean? Reacting to a language they didn’t recognize as if they were about to be attacked seemed a bit of an overreaction.

“Your aura altered,” the matron snapped at her, “what just happened? How did you even manage to do that?”

Her aura altered? Shepard was confused, “I didn’t do anything to change it, and I don’t have an overexertion headache.” She frowned at the other Spectre, what was Vasir going on about?

“Not modulated, Shepard,” M’Tara let her barrier drop as she stepped forward, “it altered, as if it were changing to that of another person.”

“What?” Shepard turned and frowned at the tall asari in confusion, “But that shouldn’t happen, its unique per person, that’s why the Protheans used it as a biometric identifier.”

M’Tara’s lavender eyes widened a bit at that, “Really?” she sounded intrigued, “but as interesting as that is, I assure you your aura just shifted in a very odd manner.”

Shepard frowned thoughtfully, “Well, now that I think about it they didn’t take the biometric readings for those non-protheans entering government service until they had their amplifiers implanted and they were fully recovered from the surgery.”

M’Tara inclined her head, “Having an amplifier installed will alter your aura slightly, but that was not what we just felt from you.”
“Zeukeso,” Councilor Tevos spoke causing them to turn toward her hologram, “asari maidens are taught not to meld too deeply just because of the potential problems associated with taking too intense a memory imprint of another person.”

“Zeukeso can cause your aura to alter toward that of the imprinted person?” Vasir questioned her, “I was not aware of that.”

“If the imprint taken is very strong it can,” Tevos responded to the Senior Spectre, but her gaze was fixed intently upon Shepard, “especially if the imprint is of someone with much greater life experience.” Alright, she couldn’t really argue with that thought Shepard, Elder Instructor Lindariel Ealoeth was a pretty amazing and frightening woman who was also over five centuries old compared to her twenty-seven…or twenty-nine years. “There are meditative techniques that Spectre Vasir and M’Tara can teach you which should help you control the effects…” the matriarch paused and then frowned at her. “Normally such memories would fade, but with what was done to preserve your memories I am not certain when or even if that will occur.”

“One hundred years,” Shepard supplied the answer, “that’s how long they think it will take for the neurochemicals to degrade enough for them to stop affecting my memories.” Miranda had gotten back to her a few days after they had first discussed the difference in her memories with the answer. Effectively that was pretty much for the rest of her life, provided she lived long enough to even pass the century mark.

Tevos brow furrowed at that and her expression grew pensive, “Then the techniques should assist you in controlling the effects.” The matriarch fixed her with a surprisingly stern gaze, “I understand why you would be tempted to further explore the Cipher, but I request that you be cautious at least until you have a better sense of what effects these memories may have on you. We discourage our maidens from forming strong memory imprints because they can too easily dominate a maiden’s perceptions, in essence overshadowing their growth as an individual with another's thoughts and feelings. I am not certain what effect these prothean imprints might have on a mature human such as you Shepard, but suspect there is reason to be cautious of their influence on your own mind and personality.”

Surprised, Shepard nodded her head, that actually sounded like a justifiable concern. She would do what she felt she needed to in order to stop the Reapers and their current intermediaries, the Collectors, but she would definitely keep the Councilor’s warning in mind.

“Surely we are not taking this preposterous idea that she has prothean memories stored in her mind seriously?” Councilor Sparatus broke into the conversation. “Her explanation for how the Thorian might have obtained such memories is weak at best.”

Councilor Valern turned toward him, “Unlike her unsubstantiated claims about the Reapers, there is a rather steadily growing body of evidence to support Spectre Shepard’s claim that she possesses actual Prothean memories. There is the information provided to our research team by Shiala T’Jrai about the nature of the Cipher she transferred to Spectre Shepard, the physical evidence of the neurological scan done by Dr. T’Rani, and now what both Senior Spectres sensed about the bioelectrical changes in Spectre Shepard’s aura when she focused on one of the memory imprints to speak in Prothean to you. The last is the strongest evidence that she is speaking the truth as before the discovery of Ilos Prothean researchers did not possess enough auditory samples of the language to create a translation program for the spoken language. The only translation program available was for the written language. She does not currently possess an omni-tool capable of translating the language and she could not have gained the knowledge prior to obtaining the Cipher as it did not exist at that time. Thus, the knowledge of how to speak it now must reside within her own mind. The most reasonable explanation then is that not only does Spectre Shepard believe that she carries within her
mind the memories of actual protheans, but that she is also telling the factual truth.” The salarian Councilor paused to take a breath.” As for how she obtained such memories, she stated that her proposed explanation was only a theory, one she admits she has no way of knowing whether or not it is true.”

Even though he had just spoken out in support of her, Shepard was still rather offended at the salarian’s implication that she was normally deluded in her beliefs. The betrayed expression Councilor Sparatus was directing toward Councilor Valern though made it just about worth it. It was clear that he had expected his co-Councilor to back up his position, not set about disproving it.

“You have mentioned twice now that the Prothean Empire uplifted races to assist them in their war against the Metacons?” Shepard reluctantly shifted her attention away from watching Sparatus and Valern, finding the way the turian glaring was glaring at the Valern and the salarian was steadfastly ignoring him in favor of checking something on his omni-tool rather satisfyingly amusing, to respond to Councilor Tevos.

“It was an act of desperation to ensure their survival,” she admitted to the matriarch, “but the Empire also strongly suspected that if they were defeated then the Metacons would return to the worlds they had initially bypassed and eradicate the primitive races upon them.”

“What happened to them afterward, once the Metacons were defeated,” Anderson inquired with a frown.

She truly only had bits and pieces of the period of time following the end of the Metacon War and the attack by the Reapers. “I don’t know much about after the war, what I do know comes from the memories of Dragahîr Thalion Elendel, who was involved with anti-slavery and anti-piracy efforts along the borders of the Empire in an effort to reclaim the full extent of their prior territory.” She fell silent, the next part…unlike what Liara had thought, the Protheans were not very progressive or tolerant toward other races at all. Personally, she found the reality of their attitude toward other races very difficult to reconcile with the fact that she admired and respected Thalion and Lindariel’s dedication to their people and how they held to their personal honor. Especially since the traits that she admired were directly responsible for their intolerance of those who weren’t as dedicated and honorable. She drew in a breath, “The races they had uplifted were either entirely integrated into the Empire as Protheans or...they were deemed racially incapable of it and wiped out.” Anderson looked stunned at her words, Valern thoughtful, Sparatus unsurprisingly was still scowling, probably undecided whether or not to even believe she was telling the truth, while Tevos looked frankly disturbed by the information. “The Protheans had a very regimented way of life, bound first by their dedication to the Empire which demanded strict discipline and piety, and second to their dedication to their family and personal honor,” she attempted to explain, “they did not feel as if they could tolerate those who could not adopt their ways as their own and maintain their Empire. Also, as they had demonstrated they were the strongest, at least in their minds, of all the races they felt that proved the superiority of their way of life and of the Empire. Thus all other races should strive to rise to be as they were, to do less was considered a sign of moral degeneracy and rebellion against the Empire.”

“The word Dragahîr, what does it mean?” M’Tara inquired once she fell silent, “is it a title?”

Shepard turned toward the taller asari, “Yes it is, the closest translation I can think of is Battlemaster and it is the highest rank of three ranks of the Order of Varnor. In human terms,” she glanced over toward Anderson, “the Order of Varnor would be considered a modern order of templars as it was attached to the state religion of the Empire and dedicated to the fraternal twin Gods Thalion and Callionel, the Protectors of the Empire.” Just then her stomach rumbled rather loudly, startling her and reminding her that it had been almost twelve hours now since she had last eaten something. The bad thing was she still didn’t really feel that particularly hungry, but apparently that was a side effect
of her implants and the amount of bio-synthetic muscle used to reconstruct her body.

“How long has it been since you’ve last eaten?” Anderson asked her in a stern tone, “Dr. T’Rani said you were around fifteen pounds underweight.”

Shepard looked over to see him frowning at her, “Twelve hours,” she responded to him. “I have been attempting to eat enough to maintain my weight, but I didn’t realize I needed to account for the cybernetics,” she explained and then grumbled, “it would be a lot easier if I actually got hungry when I needed to eat.”

Councilor Valern joined the conversation, “That is a common side effect of cybernetic and bio-synthetic reconstruction and Spectre Shepard’s body has been extensively reconstructed, so I would expect the effects to be pronounced.”

“So Dr. T’Rani informed me,” Shepard replied and then sighed as her gut gave another pronounced gurgle of dissatisfaction.

“Perhaps we should break for a few hours and let Shepard get something to eat,” Anderson suggested, “I could use a short break as well since it looks like we have quite a few topics to still cover.”

“Not before she explains why she has been working with Cerberus,” Sparatus demanded, scowling at her. “I will accept that she is indeed Spectre Shepard given the results of the DNA testing, but that does not answer why she hasn’t reported to the Citadel before now.”

“Information gathering,” Shepard promptly responded, she wasn’t about to mention the Reapers given the Council’s stance, but then she didn’t need to mention them. “I needed to figure out the real reason Cerberus had brought me back, what the Illusive Man’s actual goal was other than the one he stated to me.”

“What was his stated goal?” Anderson asked her.

“To stop the Collectors from taking more human colonies,” she replied, “to that end he had me visit the site of the latest Collector attack, Freedom’s Progress. I assume Tali forwarded a copy of the data Veetor collected on the attack?” At his nod she continued, “I was suspicious of that from the start, as it didn’t really make any sense that they would spend two years and four billion dollars in research and reconstructive efforts to bring back one person instead of using that money directly to help the colonies develop better defenses. And my initial suspicions were then borne out by the state of the crew and ship provided to me to accomplish the task.”

“What do you mean by that?” Sparatus’s question was grudging, but at least it indicated he was listening to her.

“I’ve got a ship that’s almost a duplicate of the Normandy except for being slightly larger, but has no significant advantages in armoring, defensive barriers or stealth abilities to go up against the Collectors. The ship’s crew is made up exclusively of colonists with civilian-only training, not a one of them has ever even been in the military or has any combat experience.” Sparatus’s mandibles fluttered at that, a sign of unease. He knew as well as she did that was a recipe for disaster on a ship expecting to see combat. “Given the number of colonists on Freedom’s Progress and the time taken for the Collectors to remove all of them from the colony we estimated that a force of at least 15,000 Collectors attacked the colony.” She shook her head, “The ship and crew are terribly mismatched for the mission.” She groaned as she recalled the results of the first drill, “I sprang the first attack drill on them and the results were about what you would expect, about a quarter of them froze up and couldn’t figure out how to respond to the information they were getting from their consoles.” On
either side of her she noticed that both Spectres had turned their heads to listen to her.

Shepard continued, “Given everything I previously mentioned, I began considering what might actually be the Illusive Man’s goal since I judged the possibility of us successfully completing his stated one to be rather low.” She turned her attention to the salarian Councilor, “Councilor Valern would you consider four billion to be a reasonable amount to spend for an expedition to go through the Omega 4 relay and provide the Council access to the Collector technology on the other side?”

The salarian stared at her for a moment then actually smiled, “I would consider four billion to be quite an acceptable investment in that case. The technology the Collectors trade is more advanced than what we have and it is reasonable to assume that they have been trading their older technologies.”

“So, Cerberus wants whatever is on the other side of that relay, Collector technology and research to further their goals. That does sound like them,” agreed Anderson.

Shepard nodded, “It does,” she agreed, “so I believe the Illusive Man actually just wants me to figure out how to get safely through the relay for him…” she paused, “then I suspect I’ll turn into a liability rather than an investment and he’s given me a disposable crew and ship.”

Anderson grunted, “Estimated number of actual Cerberus personnel onboard?”

“Two for certain, Miranda Lawson, the research team lead for my reconstruction and Jacob Taylor, ex-Alliance corsair,” Shepard replied, giving up the two names with little remorse. “Probably at least one buried in the crew,” she paused then added, “if I had to make a guess I’d say Rupert Gardner, the Mess Sargent. He’s perfectly placed with his duties as cook and general maintenance person to listen into the crew and spends time in the Starboard Cargo Area which besides containing a trash compactor also contains the ships video surveillance monitoring station.” She paused for a moment, second guessing herself, but really there was no way around the fact that when Council forces took the ship they would find out about EDI. “Probably at least one more somewhere, I’d guess in one of the sensor technicians as their best placed to monitor inbound and outbound communications though their job is made much easier by the ship’s shackled AI which is hardwired into all the ship’s systems.”

Councilor Valern nodded at her first comment and then snapped his head up at the second, “Shackled AI,” the salarian repeated, his large dark eyes blinking in surprise, “Cerberus developed and installed an AI aboard the ship they provided you?”

Shepard glanced around, she was definitely the focus of everyone’s attention right now. “They did,” she affirmed, “crew calls her EDI for Enhanced Defense Intelligence, she’s installed to run the ships cyber warfare defenses. However, she’s also wired into the monitoring devices aboard the ship and forwards regular reports onto the Illusive Man.”

“Hmm an AI,” the salarian murmured, “that will make things more difficult.”

“No kidding,” snorted Shepard, “providing we actually survive what’s on the other side of the relay, I’m betting TIM will send her a signal to cause her to lock down the ship. Miranda already told me that she wanted to put in a control chip as a measure of last resort to keep me from betraying them. He forbid it, but that might have been because there was already another control measure in place.”

“That’s provided your mind is truly your own right now and hasn’t already been meddled with by Cerberus,” Councilor Sparatus remarked as he stared stonily at her.

The turian’s remark earned glares from both Anderson and Tevos, but Valern just waved his hand
dismissively, “In a clone that would have been a possibility, but not in Shepard herself. We consulted several neuroscientists about the theoretical possibility once it was raised and they all agreed that it simply would not work on a mind with already existing memories. You can do an exact replacement, such as what was done for President Huerta, but you cannot alter the information in any manner without risking memory degradation and psychological instability. Besides, if they had utilized that method then the drell neurochemicals would not have been needed and we have multiple pieces of evidence proving their use.”

“What?” Shepard inquired, puzzled about what they might be talking about, but also concerned at Sparatus’s insinuation, “what other method could Cerberus have used?”

“Recent technological advances allowed human doctors to take a synthetic copy of President Huerta’s memory functions which then gave them extra time to restore his body after a stroke. The memories were then re-uploaded to his mind,” Councilor Valern explained. “We were initially concerned that such technology might have been used upon you and that it might allow for the addition of conditioning triggers. At Councilor Anderson’s insistence we consulted with several experts in the neurosciences field and they cast considerable doubt on the viability of such a method. However, they believed it might be quite successful when used upon a clone which would have no prior memories present to conflict with the altered copy.”

‘Matacemen, he intended to plant doubt into your mind, do not let him succeed, and do not show any before him. He is looking to see if he exposed any weakness.’ Thalion’s voice rang within her mind. At the same time, Vasir and M’Tara turned their heads to look at her, her aura must have changed, realized Shepard.

“The Omega 4 relay,” commented Tevos, “we would need to obtain permission and likely assistance from Warlord T’Loak to keep watch over it.” The matriarch looked like she was about to say something else but Shepard’s stomach interrupted her with quite a loud squiggling sound, signaling its complete emptiness. The asari raised her brow at it, “But perhaps the remainder of this conversation can be conducted without the presence of our Spectres. Unless anyone has any objections,” Tevos glanced pointedly over toward Sparatus who declined to say anything, “then the three of you are dismissed until further notice. Spectre Shepard how long were you planning on remaining on the Citadel?”

“I can stay another 32 or so hours but then I need to either send a message or return to my ship,” Shepard immediately responded.

“Very well,” Tevos acknowledged, “we will either contact you later today or first thing tomorrow to go over the details of your proposed mission. If you wish to discuss biotic techniques over your meal I believe Conference room 137 is free for the remainder of the day. Spectres Vasir and M’Tara are aware of the procedure for ordering meals and having them delivered to the security checkpoint for pickup.”

That was an obvious dismissal, and as the two asari Spectres bowed to the Council Shepard quickly followed suit and then trailed behind them as they headed toward the door. There was more she wanted to say to the Council about Cerberus and the Collectors, but apparently the Councilors wanted to have a private discussion among the four of them. Probably a good idea, and it would give her time to consider exactly what she wanted to say to them. Hopefully their second session would focus more on Cerberus and their plans instead of meandering from topic to topic at the whims of the various Council members. She really had no clue before now that Tevos was quite so interested in biotic techniques or in the Protheans.
Shepard’s stomach growled again once they exited the conference room and were standing out in the hallway. “Well, at least your stomach has the sense to know you need to eat,” M’Tara noted with evident amusement. “Conference Room 137 is right there,” the nais indicated the next doorway on the left side of the hall. “I believe we should follow Councilor Tevos’ suggestion and discuss what you’ve learned from the Cipher over lunch. We can order from Ta’Lira’s, get an assortment of dishes for the three of us to share.”

“That sounds good to me,” Vasir seconded the notion, then turned to Shepard, “are there any asari dishes that you particularly like?”

“Well,” caught flat-footed Shepard had to take a moment to think of the few dishes she had had a chance to taste. Well there was that one fish dish, and the vegetable and fruit dish...oh and those delicious little cookies served at the Consort’s. “I don’t know the names of all the dishes,” she warned them, “but one was called Resi Meri, and was a fish dish with a slightly sweet sauce, another was a vegetable and fruit dish called Onkov Kowemeri, and in desserts I don’t know what they’re called, but they’re little blue and white swirled cookies with a delicate floral scent that seem a lot like macarons,” she measured out the diameter with her thumb and first finger to show the size. It was only when she noticed the smirk on Vasir’s dark blue lips and intrigued look in the nais’ brown eyes that she suspected that she had given away exactly where she had them.

“Hmm,” Vasir drawled with a thoughtful tap on her lower lip, “Alena, floral scented round blue and white cookies, about five centimeters in diameter, that sound familiar to you? Seems familiar to me, but I’m not quite certain where I had them.” Shepard stifled an exasperated sigh at the matron’s antics. It was quite obvious that Vasir knew exactly where the cookies came from and was not about to just let it go.
M’Tara, her lavender eyes twinkling with amusement and her dark purple lips curved in a smirk very similar to the one worn by her fellow tormentor drawled back, “Sounds like she’s talking about Merikewi cookies to me, but ones with a floral scent and made in Tevura’s colors? There’s only one place on the Citadel to find those specific Merikewi cookies and I don’t think the Consort lets you order them out as they come with their services. Though maybe if Shepard added her request to ours perhaps she might make an exception just this once?”

Tevura the sixth planet in the Parthina System and the Asari Goddess of love, sex, travel and law; it really did make sense now that they were unique to the Consort. It even sounded as if they were traditionally only served by them. Shepard’s silver eyes narrowed, during their passage through the Presidium on the way to the Citadel Tower they had been forced to clear out most of the attacking geth forces remaining in the area, including a rather large group trying to make their way into the Consort’s to slaughter those taking refuge within the compound. Sha’ira had been leading the defense of the compound, utilizing singularities, warps, and throws against the attacking geth all the while directing the defenders. Shepard had been very impressed with her and her acolyte’s ability to defend themselves, but it had also been clear that they would have been overrun by sheer numbers if Shepard and her team hadn’t helped by thinning them out. She hadn’t specifically mentioned it in any of her reports and as far as she knew only the ground team which had accompanied her thought the Conduit to the Citadel knew about it.

Sha’ira had sent a very grateful note a few days after the Battle, but Shepard hadn’t had an opportunity to visit before the Council sent her back out after the Geth. It had been quite apparent to her at the time that they just wanted to limit any chances of her spreading her ‘Reaper’ warnings even though she had agreed that everything should remain classified until the various governments had a coordinated response to present to the general public along with the news to prevent widespread panic. Then of course the Normandy had been attacked and not only had she had died, but apparently so had the Council’s belief that there was any reason for that coordinated response. “It might,” Shepard replied with seeming nonchalance, “provided you let me write the request.” As she began typing she noticed the two asari exchanging questioning glances before returning their attention to her. Vasir leaned back against hallway wall and crossed her arms as she waited for Shepard to finish typing. When Shepard finished the note wasn’t as polished as she would like, but hopefully Sha’ira would forgive her for it. It was difficult to figure out what exactly to say to the Consort. In the end, Shepard settled for a simple greeting, an assurance that she would attempt to come by in person to explain as much as she was permitted, and then asked if it were possible for some of the cookies to be sent over to the Tower security desk as she was taking a lunch break and recalled how delicious they tasted. Finally, she attached her newly re-issued identification to the note in the hope that it would assure whomever opened it on Sha’ira’s behalf that it wasn’t just some sick joke. “Alright Vasir my request is done,” she transferred the text file over to Vasir, “hopefully with one or both of your idents on it the receptionist won’t just delete it.”

“You can call me Tela,” Vasir informed her as the nais scanned her message and then added a brief message of her own before forwarding it to the Consort. “Alena, why don’t you show Shepard the recording capabilities available to us while I go ahead and place our order. You two can also start thinking about how to structure the training.” She glanced back toward the conference room they had just left, “especially since I suspect they will want Shepard back in there in just a few hours rather than tomorrow.”

Shepard could only agree, she didn’t think the Council would wait until tomorrow either. “I already know where I want to start though it may be a bit of a tedious review for both of you,” she commented, “but for those that aren’t asari it will make it much easier for them to learn everything else.” Heck even Jack had quietly commented to her how much easier aura sensing made everything
else she was teaching them to learn.

“What is that?” M'Tara curiously inquired.

“Aura sensing,” Shepard replied, “once you can sense both your own and others biotics it makes it much easier to tell when you’re getting the technique right.” Mindful that the hallway was not exactly secured space, Shepard said, “Once Tela joins us I’ll explain more.” Looking rather intrigued the tall asari dipped her head in understanding before heading down the hallway.

“Do not start without me,” Tela warned them before turning her attention to the haptic display of her omni-bracelet.

“I won’t,” Shepard reassured her then turned to follow M’Tara into the room.

They had just finished going over the room’s recording options, which included that of a 360-degree recording for virtual environments, when Tela rejoined them. The matron entered the room and then just stared with a bemused expression at the human Spectre for a long moment, causing both Shepard and M’Tara to fall silent in puzzlement at her. “Consort Sha’ira contacted me a few minutes ago to verify that message you sent her was real,” Tala finally spoke, “she said for us to send a message when we are ready for dessert and they will send someone over with Merikewi cookies and Tuweapoda tea for us. She also said she has no appointments scheduled after eighteen hundred hours if you wish to visit tonight.”

Shepard allowed herself a moment to savor the stunned expression on Alena M’Tara’s face. Sometimes it was the petty things in life that made it all worthwhile. As for Sha’ira’s message, she suspected that an open-ended invitation like that was probably very rare. If were at all possible, she would go by the compound tonight. Hopefully Sha’ira could also help her out with another matter, a way to securely contact Liara and let her know that she was alive. “Could you please send me that so I can send a reply back to her.”

“Of course,” Tela responded and then sent it over. The matron watched as she composed her reply and then sent it, then asked, “So how do you know Sha’ira?”

She had been expecting this question, “From before I even made Spectre actually,” Shepard admitted and then chuckled, “oddly enough, when I first heard of the Consort and her services it was in reference to her some of her acolytes being Eliaon practitioners.” That earned her puzzled looks from both asari, obviously not quite what they were expecting to hear. “No, I wasn’t looking for a massage right then,” she explained, “but I was looking for arepa ointment and I figured they would know where I might buy some on the Citadel.” Arepa ointment was similar in usage to tiger balm, but smelled somewhat like cinnamon and amber instead of menthol.

Mirth evident in her tone, M’Tara asked, “You actually stopped by the Consort’s to ask them where to get some ointment?”

Shepard nodded with a rueful look, “And it took me awhile to actually get the receptionist to realize that I really was there just for the information and not to get an appointment. She was about to ask one of the acolytes who practiced Eliaon to come up and speak to me when Sha’ira sent a request for me to see her. I suspect it was pure curiosity on her part to get a look at the potential human Spectre, but she did ask me to look into something for her regarding an issue she was having with a client of hers. And no, I won’t tell you what, but in the course of searching for evidence on Saren I just happened to be able to take care of it rather easily.” General Septimus had also accidentally given her a rather interesting piece of information during their conversation, that even the Hierarchy didn’t
say anything about partaking in the Consort’s services because she had never been known to break her vow of confidentiality in all the centuries she had been present on the Citadel. “In return, she gave me a rather interesting Prothean necklace. In a small universe twist of fate, the necklace turned out to actually be a prothean data recorder implant used by one of the prothean researchers on the Mars base which had been implanted in a Stone Age human on Earth. We stumbled upon a public data terminal on Elentania which activated it, causing it to transmitted the data it recorded which encompassed about few weeks’ worth of his life.”

“Wait what?” Vasir interrupted, looking shocked, “was that in your reports?”

“The ones that I sent to Udina and the Council,” Shepard confirmed, “the Alliance had me turn over the data recorder implant for study, but I don’t know what if anything they were able to learn from it.”

“Something to inquire about perhaps,” M’Tara noted with a glance at Tela, “see if there were any results from their research of it.”

Vasir seemed to think about that for a moment, “Alright,” she agreed, then turned back to Shepard, “but what did you mean by a public data terminal on Elentania?”

“Exactly what I said,” Shepard explained with a puzzled frown, “they’re like the ones available on the Citadel for the public to use. You could either access public resources or connect your own storage device to it in order to access your data.” She shrugged, “I mean of course the one on Elentania wasn’t connected to a network anymore, but it was still functional enough to access the information stored in the implant.” She thought about it for a second recalling the rugged terrain where they had located it, “Odd place for a public terminal, but maybe it was a park of some sort once. In any case, it’s impressive that it was still functional after 50,000 years.”

Vasir and M’Tara both stared at her, their expressions thoughtful. “I’d be curious to know what changes Sha’ira senses in your aura,” M’Tara finally remarked, “and we definitely need to teach you those techniques Councilor Tevos mentioned to help prevent Zeukeso. I suspect you weren’t quite so calm about it when you accessed it on Elentania.”

Shepard frowned, no, no she hadn’t been as calm about it then. She had been pretty freaked out about it actually when it happened, since at that time she had no idea what the silvery floating globe was or what exactly it had done to her. “You may be right,” she admitted, “certainly knowing what it was makes it less alarming in retrospect.”

The other Spectre dipped her head in understanding, and Shepard continued on with her explanation of how she knew Sha’ira, “Anyway, since I hadn’t yet had time to swing by a store to get ointment she made a gift of that as well.” That hadn’t been the only extra gift she had received that day. She had received the gift of fully sharing pleasure with Sha’ira, including her first melding experience due to Septimus’ unintentionally meant reassurance that whatever the Consort saw in her mind would remain private between them. Afterward, Sha’ira had given her a gift of her words as well. “Later, after I was made a Spectre, I sent a request asking the rate just to visit her meditation garden and she sent back that as long as there was a private area not yet in use I could visit any time I felt I needed it. So that’s how I got to know her, during my visits to her meditation garden she would occasionally stop and speak to me.”

Tela’s dark eyes were shrewd on her as the nais inquired, “Needed a place to get away from everyone judging whether or not you were loyal enough to the Alliance?” That was it exactly, but Shepard was hardly about to just admit it. Instead she simply gave the blue nais a reproving look
then briefly explained what had happened during the Battle of the Citadel outside the Consort’s
compound. “So, she owes you for not only her life, but the lives of her acolytes and those who
sought her protection,” Vasir commented, “that explains why she would send one of her acolytes
over to deliver the cookies and tea for you.”

It did, but she was also going to find out which of the acolytes had brought it over and tip them
appropriately for doing it. “Alright so onto discussing biotic techniques?” Shepard inquired when
neither of them immediately said anything else. At their nods of agreement, she began, “Aura
sensing is very useful in teaching everything else, especially for those of us who aren’t asari and
aren’t normally taught how to use our senses this way. Aura sensing not only allows us to not only
feel our own biotic fields, which helps quite a bit in getting the nuances correct, but it also helps with
being able to discern how another person is forming their biotic fields.”

“You weren’t taught this already?” Alena M’Tara inquired, her expression showing her surprise.

“No, they used sensors to map our mass effect fields and showed us the read-outs when I was
learning how to use my biotics,” Shepard explained. “It worked, but this way, being able to do it
yourself and have it always available to you, is so much more useful.” The two asari exchanged
glances that made it very clear that they considered that to be an incredibly obvious statement.
“Thus, it was always one of the first things Elder Instructor Lindariel taught to the non-protheans
who she tutored.”

“Tutored?” Tela inquired as she leaned back in her chair, her medium blue complexioned face
showing her intrigue with the topic.

Shepard nodded, “She taught the equivalent of human high school or asari academy aged maidens
mental communications techniques.”

Vasir looked startled, “They could meld?”

“No,” Shepard quickly responded, “their method of mental communication was rather different from
melding. Asari mental communication is based on syncing nervous systems and can be bi-
directional, Prothean mental communication was based on their ability to detect even the minutest
traces of chemicals and electrical energies by touch through receptors in their skin. They were very
good at reading information from people or even objects, but the communication was one way
only.” Shepard thought about it for a moment and then said, “Probably one of the reasons their
technology developed the way it did, it made up for that gap in their abilities.” She paused for a
moment to let them digest that factoid then continued, “So as I mentioned, Lindariel tutored non-
protheans who were candidates for governmental civil service positions how to sense and alter their
aura or órë. The skill was required in order to interact with Prothean devices, something they had to
demonstrate they could do before they were actually hired on by the government.” Before either of
them could interrupt, Shepard just offered, “And yes I’ll show you exactly how they interacted with
their devices.” With a smirk she turned to M’Tara, “Ok, so you’re a Prothean data input device or
console or something of that nature.”

The tall asari’s brow rose as she smirked right back, “And you want to find out what treasures might
be hidden inside me?” she practically purred as she leaned suggestively back in her chair, “certainly.”

It took Shepard a second or two to accept that yes, the nais had done that while they were recording
this and apparently didn’t care one whit about it. When she looked back, Alena’s smirk was wider
and her mirthful lavender eyes clearly said ‘I win this round…again.’ Dammit. Just then, her
stomach, which had been mostly quiet since they entered the room spoke up again, completely
Alena glanced over at Tela who responded, “It should be here very soon, I’m expecting the desk to contact us at any moment.”

“Let’s see if we can get through this first then, it won’t take very long for me to explain,” Shepard commented.

Tela glanced over at her fellow asari and teasingly chided her, “Yes, let’s focus on the task at hand.”

“Who says I’m not?” M’Tara rebutted with a grin, but she did straighten up in her chair.

Shepard had the momentary feeling that all the times she had been a smartass in front of a presenter were coming back to haunt her all at the same time. Somewhere out in the universe several instructors and speakers were experiencing unexplained feelings of vindication. She suppressed a sigh as she glanced at the two of them and then just decided there was nothing for it but to just soldier on, “So…” she paused a moment to get their attention, “if you two will pay close attention to my aura.” She waited a moment until they both inclined their heads indicating that they were, “To activate a device you manipulate your aura in this particular pattern,” she focused on what was essentially an almost activation of her biotics in order to alter her aura in a particular manner. “Part of the aura training I’ll go over next teaches exactly how to produce this pattern, but once you do that the device’s sensors would detect the right pattern and responded by activating.” She hesitated for a moment as a thought occurred to her, “You know, I can’t guarantee hasn’t changed since Lindariel’s time, but should work for any piece of general government equipment during the middle of the Metacon War at least.” She then continued, “After activating the device then you would identify yourself with your aura signature,” she relaxed her órë, let it return to its natural state, “and if you were in the system, your name would appear on the device screen. At this point, you would place your hand on the data input sensor and recite your name and activation code to complete the authentication process and login to the device.”

“So, every government device used the same activation pattern?” Tela sounded dubious at the idea.

“No, they didn’t,” Shepard replied, “but that was the one used by low level civil servants to the government. I know from Thalion’s memories that the Order of Vanor used at least two different activation codes for different levels of access. And general public use devices accepted almost any input for activation, since they were meant to be used by children and, by Lindariel’s time, by those who weren’t born Prothean.”

Before either one could ask her anything else Tela’s omni-bracelet chimed, signaling an incoming call. The matron looked down at it and then rose from her chair, “It’s the security desk, our food has arrived.” While she was gone, Alena spend the time quizzing Shepard over the differences between the different activation patterns she knew and also sent out a message for someone to deliver a sensor sensitive enough that could get accurate measurements of them. When Tela returned, she was loaded down with four hefty bags of boxed food. Shepard’s eyes widened at the sight of them, surely even three biotics couldn’t possibly eat that much food. The matron laughed at her when she noticed, “Don’t worry quite a few of these are finger foods for us to snack on as we work, their more box than food.”

They spread the food containers out along the table, Tela naming each one as she set them out and then began serving themselves. Shepard got servings of the two dishes she had ordered, the Resi Meri and the Onkov Kowemeri vegetable and fruit dish and then took out smaller servings of several other dishes that seemed interesting to taste. The Resi Meri was just as delicious as she remembered,
the fish, whatever it was, firm and meaty yet delicately flavored and served in a slightly sweet brown sauce. The Onkov Kowemeri was a simpler dish, essentially just caramelized vegetables and fruit mixed together in a colorful arrangement of oranges, reds and yellows. To Shepard’s surprise, Tela had picked out two other vegetable dishes, one seemed to be simple sautéed greens, the other she suspected from the smell was a rather colorful seaweed salad that mixed red, green and yellow varieties. She tried both, the seaweed salad to her surprise was less fishy tasting than it smelled and proved to be a nice accompaniment to the fish. She tried a few other dishes as well. One was a finely sliced red meat dish that tasted similar to beef served with a berry sauce. Another was a chicken like meat, which she suspected was actually a reptile given that the name of dish included the word sorat, served with a rich cream sauce. Finally, at both the urging of Alena and Tela she tried another fish dish, one with a pinkish meat that reminded her of tuna, cubed and seared and served in a rich brown sauce. After that, she firmly refused to eat another bite, feeling stuffed and over-full. She appreciated that they wanted to make sure she ate enough, but she couldn’t possibly eat enough at one sitting to regain it all. The two asari were apparently going to make a Spectre level go of it however, given the richness of the dishes Tela had chosen to order. That wasn’t the end of it though, no sooner had they cleared their lunch plates than Tela opened the containers of finger foods and set them out. They were small and colorful and deliberately enticing. They were going to kill her Shepard decided as she curiously picked out one of the more interesting looking ones to taste, she was going to explode from food over-consumption and they hadn’t even called for the cookies and tea.

Shepard went over the different activation sequences again for Tela, then began discussing the various aura sensing and manipulation exercises she had learned from Lindariel’s memories. Sometime into her explanation, the sensor M’Tara had asked to be delivered arrived and Shepard took the opportunity to demonstrate exactly how the exercises affected the aura to produce the specific sequences. Once they finished going over Lindariel’s exercises, Shepard moved on to the sound manipulation technique and barrier field from the unnamed young musician. The two asari quickly caught on to the barrier field and its purpose, but the sound affecting mass effect field proved to be a bit more problematic for them.

Shepard hadn’t appreciated how her vocal training, specifically the ability to hit a note and sustain it, had affected the successful application of the biotic technique. It wasn’t that Vasir or M’Tara couldn’t hit a note, or didn’t have nice singing voices for they did, it was just that neither was used to precisely sustaining a note for twenty or more seconds. Tela called a halt to the training after thirty minutes, declaring that they had enough of an idea about how it was done to perfect it on their own…and maybe get some vocal training to go along with it. They moved onto what Shepard was currently teaching to Miranda, Jacob and Jack what she called her ‘Squeeze every Joule out of your Biotics’ training. It was essentially Lindariel’s lessons combined with the extra she had learned about energy conservation techniques from Thalion. She was in the midst of one of the lessons when the Council contacted them and requested Shepard’s presence in the other conference room.

“Shepard,” Anderson greeted her when she entered the room, “have a good lunch?” The other three weren’t there yet, not even in hologram form.

She laughed, “Yes I did, though I think Vasir and M’Tara were intent on getting me back up to weight in one meal.” She patted her slightly protruding stomach, “Feeling a bit over full at the moment, but they kept putting samples of this and that on my plate. Then there were the little appetizers that I needed to try just one, their small.”

He chuckled, “Glad to see your getting along with them, there was too little opportunity before for
you to interact with the other Spectres. And then well...” he paused, staring at her, “I can hardly believe your back and...”

“Up and breathing again after I died,” Shepard filled in the silence, “yea, it’s been pretty weird all the way around.”

Concern etched lines in his features, “Do you need to speak with someone about it? I can arrange for you to speak to someone trustworthy.”

Did she need to speak with someone? Shepard knew that she probably should talk about the way she felt disconnected from her body with its implants and bio-synthetic muscle that she could still stare at through the sections of skin grafts. How finding out that she needed to eat still yet more food than she had been to provide them with enough energy so they didn’t drain the rest of her down to skin and bone had her feeling yet more disconnected from this body - a body which should have been burnt to ashes and interred in Greece instead of abandoned for the Blue Suns to scavenge on Alchera. Yes...she should probably talk to someone, but the idea of talking about this to a person she did not know at all was not really very appealing.

“An introductory meeting would probably be a good idea,” Shepard finally commented, knowing that any other answer in her particular circumstances would throw up a huge red flag for him. To be fair, she wouldn’t believe that someone in her place wasn’t having issues with what had happened to her either. To be honest though, she would feel more comfortable speaking about it with Sha’ira rather than some unknown human. It had taken her nearly four months to track down Saren, and in between the too rare solid lead or busy work for the Alliance they had returned to the Citadel so Garrus and Wrex could speak to their contacts and she could work with Anderson scouring Alliance data for any clue to the rogue Spectre’s current location or activities. That had left her plenty of time to make use of her open-ended permission to visit the Consort’s meditation garden, and for most of those visits Sha’ira had taken the time to speak with her even if only for a few minutes. Over the course of those months the two of them had some wide-ranging conversations, ranging from discussions of music to eventually her opening up about how the Alliance was questioning her loyalty now that she had been made a Spectre. Sha’ira had been a great help, almost magically knowing when she just needed someone to listen and when she could use some good advice. Nelyna had called the Consort extremely gifted, but Shepard hadn’t been certain if she hadn’t been originally correct when she named the asari an oracle given how almost prescient Sha’ira seemed at times. In short, she already had a therapeutic relationship with the asari, she trusted Sha’ira and valued her advice and would rather talk about this with her than anyone else.

Before either of them could say anything about when to schedule a meeting though, the holographic forms of the three other Councilors formed, indicating that the second meeting was about to actually begin.
Part 1: Chapter 18::12 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 6

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The Mass Effect universe is the property of Bioware/Electronic Arts. No infringement of these copyrights is intended as this is a not for profit fan fiction work.

Rewrite Notes: Still inspired by the Beyonce song “Save the Hero,” from the album I am…Sasha Fierce.

Author’s Notes: Spectre Alena M’Tara is based on LuckyFK’s Confidence picture on DeviantArt.

Revision History: 2/13/2018

12 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 6

“Spectre Shepard,” Valern began speaking almost immediately after the three Councilors’ holograms formed, “concerning your proposed mission to discover a way through the Omega 4 Relay and provide any technology or information there to Citadel forces while denying them to Cerberus. We are intrigued with the possibilities presented by it, and certainly we don’t want Cerberus to have access to advanced Collector technology. Before we can make a final decision however, we need more information from you.” Shepard nodded, really she would have been astonished if they had not had more questions.

“Two years ago, you were convinced of the existence of the Reapers,” Sparatus took up smoothly right after Valern fell silent, apparently they were back on script noticed Shepard, “what did Cerberus tell you about the Collectors in order to persuade you to go to Freedom’s Progress instead of reporting directly to the Council or Alliance?”

“The Illusive Man did mention that he thought the Collectors and Reapers were somehow involved with one another,” Shepard readily admitted, suspecting she knew what was coming next.

The turian Councilor leapt on the admission, “Then the real reason you want us to approve this mission is so that you can continue to pursue this Reaper obsession of yours!”

“So?” Shepard coolly replied, and then allowed herself a moment to enjoy his evident expression of surprise. She had thought for a bit that she wouldn’t get to use this fine bit of reasoning that she had worked out in her pre-trip planning. “How does that impact the results of the mission? No matter what my motivations for stopping the Collectors, and whether or not it has anything to do with finding out if they are somehow involved with the Reapers or Metacons or whatever…that in no way changes the fact that I will have to find a way through the Omega 4 Relay to do it and would much rather the Council benefited from whatever I find on the other side than Cerberus.”

“And if there is no evidence of the Reapers existence there?” Councilor Tevos inquired.

Shepard honestly didn’t know if there would be, she hadn’t yet seen any strong evidence one way or another, but something told her TIM wouldn’t have mentioned it unless he thought there was
something for her to find. How that fitted into his longer-term plans though she had no idea…yet.
“Then perhaps Councilor Sparatus is correct and the beacon message was simply an older one
relating to the Empire’s war with the Metacons,” Shepard allowed, “however, I do think we should
take any hint of the Metacons continued or renewed existence as a serious threat.”

“An entirely reasonable answer,” observed Valern, “especially if they presented as much of a threat
to the Prothean Empire as you state.” The salarian fixed his large dark eyes on her, “Quite frankly
for all our sakes I hope you find no evidence of Reapers or Metacons. As it is, dealing with the
Collectors deep within the Terminus Systems, League claimed area or not will present enough of a
challenge both militarily and politically.”

Shepard nodded in understanding, then she hesitated, wondering whether or not it was wise to even
bring this up or not…and though, better to have it out in the open than have it bite her in the ass
later. “While I am pleased that the Council is considering my proposition, I am curious about the fact
that you are willing to invade Collector territory given that you’re publicly stating this is an Alliance
matter and the attacks are actually the work of pirates and slavers?” That was something she had
noticed before; the Council hadn’t seemed at all surprised to find out that the attacks on the colonies
were actually the work of the Collectors. She had mentioned Vector’s report that Tali had forwarded
and it hadn’t even seemed to be news to them at all, they hadn’t even questioned her about it and that
strongly implied that they were already aware of it - which begged the question of how exactly they
were aware of it.

The three Councilors present by hologram glanced at one another then over at Anderson. Shepard
followed their gaze, turning toward her former Captain, obviously it was his turn to speak. “Yes, we
were already aware that the Collectors were behind the attacks,” he paused for a moment then added,
“we have been since the attack on Fehl Prime. There were witnesses to the attack who managed to
escape the Collectors.”

To say that Shepard was surprised by this was a bit of an understatement and she had to wonder how
the survivors had managed to evade the seeker swarms used on Freedom’s Progress. “And why is
this not public knowledge?” She inquired, wondering why the secrecy surrounding it.

“Our colonists are panicking enough as it is over the attacks,” Anderson stated his expression dour.
“At least the colonists know how to plan for slavers and pirates, but Collectors with swarms of
mechanical insects that leave them paralyzed…that would lead to a full-on panic and that’s
something we can’t afford right now. We’re in the process of placing GARDIAN emplacements at
all of our colonies, even the ones in the Traverse that are independent of the Alliance, in the hope
that they prove to be effective against the Collectors’ ships.”

She nodded, those were specifically designed as anti-ship emplacements and could take down a
dreadnought with enough sustained fire. The only problem was that most ships could fire back and
unless the GARDIAN’s were protected with very strong barriers could easily destroy them. “That’s
something at least, especially since it seems the Collectors are able to slip in an out so quickly. Have
you reinitiated the regular comms checks?” She referred to the practice started after the attack on
Mindoir up until just after the attack on Torfan of the colonies checking in with the Alliance every
four hours. It hadn’t been perfect, but it had helped deter attacks when the slavers had known the
Alliance would send a fast response unit after the four-hour window passed with no contact with a
colony.

Anderson nodded, “We have,” he confirmed, “and there’s a few other things you should know as
well.” Something about his expression and stance told Shepard she wouldn’t like whatever it was he
was about to say. “The visual profile of the Collector ship that attacked Fehl Prime matches the
visual profile of the ship that attacked the Normandy.”

“The ship that attacked the Normandy was a Collector ship?” Shepard stated, startled, this was unexpected information.

“So, it seems,” Anderson confirmed.

Was this why TIM thought the Collectors were associated with the Reapers she wondered, but didn’t ask. Instead she asked a less controversial question, “Has there been any sign that they were allied with the Geth?”

Anderson looked startled, “No, no there hasn’t been.”

Councilor Tevos spoke up then, clarifying the matter, “Our intelligence sources indicate that the Collectors were specifically after you Spectre Shepard.”

“Me?” she repeated numbly, thinking of how many of her crew had died in the attack. Yes, she had died as well, but she had just been the last one. “They attacked the Normandy because I was onboard?” she asked with growing anger. This then must be the connection TIM had referred to, she realized, the Reapers had decided to remove her as a threat to them. That was…she felt a chill, fairly concerning actually. ‘Or an opportunity,’ the tactically calculating part of her mind chose to let itself be known, ‘if you want the Collectors to show up at a location of your choosing instead of theirs you can use yourself as bait.’ Then Thalion’s voice chimed in, ‘Turning the hunter into the hunted.’

“That seems to be the case,” Anderson confirmed, “for whatever reason they are interested in you.”

“You have no comments on this,” Sparatus asked her, his tone oddly neutral.

She scowled at him knowing what topic he expected her to comment upon. “Comments about the number of good men and women who died that day because they were targeting me?” she rebuked him, “no, I have no specific comments to make about that.” She sighed, “Though it does seem like something to keep in mind in case we actually want the Collectors to show up at a particular location.”

“Set a trap for them,” Anderson commented, immediately seeing what she meant though he didn’t look too happy about it.

“Should it be necessary,” she reminded him, “and better than trying to guess which colony they are going to hit next.”

“You would put one of your own colonies at risk to draw the Collectors there?” Tevos inquired with a hint of disapproval.

“Freedom’s Progress comes to mind,” Shepard hurried to correct the asari’s impression, “as a site. A location with no colonists. We can install GARDIANS, but make it seem as if they’re not operational. Instead of actual workers we would have Marines posing as workers.”

“Hmm,” Valern hummed with a thoughtful look, “that is an interesting idea. It needs a bit of refinement to maximize its chance of success, but it has promise.”

Shepard nodded, “We would still need a countermeasure to those swarms they use to paralyze people. The Illusive Man forwarded a dossier to me on a Mordin Solus who he thinks can develop
“Brilliant scientist and doctor,” the salarian Councilor immediately replied, “currently located on Omega. It’s interesting that the Illusive Man should point you toward him for the project.”

Personally, Shepard found it interesting that Valern immediately knew who she was talking about and where exactly he was currently located. “That brings up something I need to address for this mission to have a chance of success.” Her gaze drifted toward the asari Councilor, “Though I consider the League’s reaction to be reasonable considering what happened on Trident, the current bounties their offering for any Cerberus member will make it rather difficult for me to gather together a ground team to go after the Collectors and discover a way through the Omega 4 Relay.”

“You are hoping we can intervene for you,” Tevos responded, “to ensure your crew is not arrested and your vessel impounded.”

“Yes, I’m hoping you can intervene for me,” she directly met the asari Councilor’s gaze, both of them knowing full well that she meant Tevos in particular with the Republic’s influence behind her.

“Shepard,” Anderson said, drawing her attention away from the asari, “there’s one more thing you need to know before we get into any detail about your proposal. Cerberus was working with the Collectors at Fehl Prime, they had an agent who assisted the Collectors by jamming the colonies communications just before the attack began. His goal seems to have been information gathering, in particular he was interested in the contents of a Prothean beacon present on the Collector ship.”

The first thing Shepard felt was fury, fury at being lied to so thoroughly by the Illusive Man and Miranda, and fury at herself for not realizing to what extent they had been playing on her reactions, on her desire to help her fellow colonists. She had suspected that stopping the Collectors wasn’t their actual goal, but hadn’t suspected the true extent of how much they really didn’t care about the fate of the colonists. ‘He has a plan already,’ oddly enough it was Lindariel’s voice in her mind not Thalion that snapped her out of her anger. “He already knows or suspects then how to get through the Omega 4 relay,” she said aloud, “what exactly was on the beacon? Do we know?” she asked Anderson.

He looked a bit startled at her jump in logic, but answered, “It was a similar message to the one you received two years ago.” That seemed like shorthand for the Council found every reason in the galaxy to ignore another warning about the Reapers to her. “Only this one included information that the Collectors were once actually Protheans.”

“Mana?” (What?) she growled out in a deeper than normal voice, unconsciously employing her biotics to deepen it beyond her normal range and tone as her mind was assaulted with anger, indignation and pain which wasn’t primarily her own. Memories hell, sometimes she felt as if she had ghosts with her, the thought ran through her mind as she struggled to get her emotions and biotics, for she could feel them rippling around her, back under her control. Collectors - Protheans. Now that she was looking for it she could see only too clearly how the Reapers had twisted the proud and, yes, arrogant race into slaves. Their heads, their eyes, similar and yet not similar at all her mind thought in anguish. Looking up she was aware of the Councilors looking at her in shock and no small degree of wariness, she lowered her gaze ducking her head as she struggled with the combined emotions of all of them. After several more seconds the prothean presences within her withdrew and her biotic flare calmed. Once she felt fully in control of herself again she lifted her head to ask, “You have confirmed this?”

“What was that?” Anderson asked her with widened eyes instead of answering her question.
At the same time, Tevos, who was staring at her with narrowed eyes, challenged her, “Bits and pieces of memory? This is something more than just a mild case of Zeukeso.”

She chose to respond to the asari Councilor first, meeting her challenge head on, “Yet they are only memories, no matter how intense they are at times.”

“The drell neurochemicals perhaps?” mused Valern, “Yet I’ve never met a drell that spoke from one of their memories from the past. They simply relive the memory.” The salarian almost seemed to be speaking to himself at this point. “Still though,” he abruptly refocused on her, “I find it interesting that you reacted more to the news that the Collectors might be Protheans than you reacted to the news that Cerberus had assisted the Collectors in attacking one of your colonies.”

Shepard sighed, “I expect Cerberus to do things that harm Humanity more than they possibly help them. So, though it was surprising news, it wasn’t that surprising to hear.”

“And yet they brought you back to life,” Sparatus observed dryly, his arms still crossed over his chest.

She snorted in grim amusement, well points to him for being the first one to fucking actually say it. “I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop on that one.”

Sparatus looked confused at that, but Anderson frowned, “You’re expecting something to go wrong with what they did to bring you back?”

“It’s Cerberus,” she responded laconically, “based on what I saw of them while tracking Saren of course I’m expecting something to go wrong.”

Anderson grimaced, “Well, let’s hope for once that they got something right.”

Shepard made a noise of wry amusement, then repeated her question that had gotten lost in their reaction to her reaction. “Have you verified that the Collectors were once Protheans?”

“No,” Valern responded to her question before Anderson, “the report from Fehl Prime indicated that the bodies of the Collectors burned into ash within a short time period of their deaths.”

“Like Saren did?” she frowned as she considered the problem.

Anderson frowned as she considered the problem.

“No,” she responded ignoring his ill mood, “now that I’ve made the Prothean connection I recognize that their derived from medical stasis pods.”

“You recognize them,” Valern sounded intrigued and she nodded, she did indeed recognize them, “they look a bit different, but they were designed to stabilize and put a severely wounded person into stasis for transport to a medical center. It makes sense they would use them to hold and transport the colonists.”
Sparatus finally snarled, “Impossible this is pure make believe and fantasy!” Shepard had wondered when he would clue into the fact that if she did indeed understand and speak the Prothean language, understand Prothean technology, understand Prothean thoughts…that it then followed that she would understand Prothean beacon messages as well and be unlikely to mistranslate or misunderstand them.

Shepard noticed Tevos turn and contemplatively stare at him for a moment before turning back to her, “I believe we should move onto our next question for Spectre Shepard.”

“Yes,” Valern chimed in, “I believe we have already identified the two Cerberus individuals you mentioned before, Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor. They were actually of great assistance to the Council a few years ago, preventing an assassination attempt on us by the Batarian Ambassador of the time, Ambassador Jath’Amon.” Shepard hadn’t heard anything about this, and found it rather fascinating. She was starting to feel like she was getting some idea of what drove the Illusive Man’s decisions, about his motivations and she didn’t like what she was beginning to see one bit. His actions and by extent Cerberus’s seemed contradictory at best if you took his motivation to actually be the betterment of Humanity. If however, you scrapped that and instead looked at what gave him more information, more technology, more influence…in short more power, then his decisions started making sense. “Intelligence had tentatively identified Miranda Lawson as a Cerberus agent and Jacob Taylor as a recruit or new member,” Valern continued speaking, “but now you have confirmed that both are Cerberus members.”

“We looked up Rupert Gardner,” Anderson added, “He was an eezo miner out in the Traverse until he dropped out of sight following a series of Batarian attacks that killed his family.” Anderson shook his head, “It’s unfortunate that his reaction to that was to join Cerberus instead of the Alliance.”

“You said the remainder of your crew appeared to have joined Cerberus very recently and were recruited specifically for this mission?” Tevos questioned next.

“Yes,” Shepard replied to her, “several of them seemed to have joined specifically to work with me to stop the Collectors.”

“If we find no evidence that they worked with Cerberus prior to this, how exactly would you prefer us to treat them?” Anderson asked her, a frown etching a crease in his brow.

“Time served?” Shepard offered after a moment’s thought, “honestly my opinion is a bit split regarding them. On one hand their civilians willing to go on a very dangerous mission to protect their fellow colonists…but on the other hand they were willing to join Cerberus to do it.” She hesitated and then decided this was probably the proper moment to mention it, “By the way you should be aware that three former Alliance members and one current Alliance member are also onboard the ship to support me.” She considered that for a moment then amended, “Well Karen is there to support both Jeff and I.” She had all four Council members attention now, and Anderson looked a bit pained at her admission.

He sighed, “That’s unfortunate for her career, however on the other hand I’m reassured that she’s your doctor onboard the ship. You need someone in that position you know you can completely trust. As for Mr. Moreau, I had wondered what happened to him after he resigned his commission. So, he’s serving as your pilot?”

“He is,” she confirmed, “as for the other two former Alliance members their serving as my engineers; Gabriella Daniels and Kenneth Donnelly, both formerly of the SSV Perugia.”
Anderson crossed his arms and stated with an unhappy scowl, “We can’t exactly just overlook the fact that their working for Cerberus.” He sounded like he dearly wanted to, but knew that it would probably be a step too far for both the Alliance and the Council.

“And yet as you pointed out I need people on that ship that I can trust,” she pointed out, keeping her tone eminently reasonable, “especially I need people on the ship that I can trust to side with me when the time comes to call in Council forces.”

“That’s true,” he agreed, glancing over toward the holograms of the other Councilors to get their opinion on it.

“Yet that wasn’t their original intent when they joined Cerberus,” Sparatus all but snarled his opinion, pointed an accusing finger at her, “they are yet others who you have brought down with your insistence on this Reaper nonsense.”

‘He is concerned about the cost if you are right, yet he is equally concerned at the cost if you are wrong,’ Thalion’s voice observed in her mind. ‘He had thought the matter decided until your return and the unlocking of the Cipher bringing renewed doubt. Now he cannot decide which of the two possibilities is right so he waits undecided in the middle and attacks you to see whether or not you will cede your ground and prove one right and one wrong.’ Shepard narrowed her silver eyes on him, considering Thalion’s assessment - and equally becoming more disturbed by how much like actual fragments of personalities they were beginning to seem…and yet they were proving to be so very valuable to her. “That quite depends doesn’t it on whether or not it’s just Reaper nonsense, that’s three beacons so far that have indicated something disastrous happened to the Protheans and this latest one-pointed right to the evidence of it being on the other side of the Omega 4 relay didn’t it?” She was guessing, but from Anderson’s expression she had struck right on the money. She shifted her gaze back to Sparatus, “I would love to be proven wrong, but equally I’m concerned about being right. Let me cooperate with Cerberus for now. Let the Illusive Man lead me around so that I can discover the clues he either already knows are there or suspects are there about how to get through the relay. Then we can all see whether there is something to be concerned about on the other side of it or not.”

“That is what you meant by he already knows how to get through the relay,” Councilor Valern unexpectedly commented, pulling her attention away from the turian Councilor whose expression she couldn’t quite decipher - anger, shock, unease, it was hard to tell which or maybe it was all three. “If you are correct, and we deny your request then Cerberus might have enough information to be able to activate the relay and proceed through it anyway.”

“Yes, I believe so,” Shepard turned toward him and confirmed, “I think the only way to ensure the Illusive Man doesn’t get access to Collector technology is to play whatever game he has setup for me and then deny him his goal at the end.”

“Such reasoning is very convenient for you Spectre Shepard,” Councilor Tevos pointed out, her tone seemingly mild.

A bitter snort escaped before Shepard could hold it back as she thought about the dark showers and claustrophobic feelings of being constantly observed by a hostile watcher, of feeling like she was the only one with good intentions trying to hold back the ending of their civilization. The asari Councilor frowned at her nonverbal response, apparently it was not quite what the matriarch had expected from her. Anderson was frowning at her as well, but he seemed more concerned than anything else. “And yet I believe the reasoning is solid,” Shepard responded, “especially with the information you just provided me about Cerberus working with the Collectors.”
“Indeed,” Valern commented, drawing everyone’s attention back to him “such was my reasoning as well, now let us return to our discussion of your crew. You freed a human woman who goes by the alias of Jack from the prison ship Purgatory.”

Tevos and Sparatus frowned slightly at him, but tellingly neither one argued with him. Shepard turned toward the salarian, evidently they were getting too far afield again from their agreed upon agenda and he was getting them back on track. “Jack, or Subject Zero, as Cerberus calls her is an interesting case.”

“Subject Zero?” Valern questioned, looking intrigued with this new bit of information. Shepard gave them a condensed version of Jack’s history, at least what she knew of it. That Jack had been a part of Cerberus experiment on biotic children, that she had been experimented upon from such a young age that she didn’t recall if she even had a family. That she had broken out, picked up by a passing ship, raped by the crew, then unsurprisingly gone on to commit all nature of criminal actions.

Showing that he had found his voice again, Sparatus growled, “Are you claiming that her past exonerates her of all her crimes?”

“No,” she responded calmly, “I’m saying it’s not surprising that she’s self-destructive and has little concept of things like self-control, civil behavior, or morals in general really. Given her past, the fact that her caregivers hurt her instead of protecting her, that she didn’t receive any emotional nurturing and very little social contact, she should really be a textbook case of a sociopath with little to no capacity for empathy.” In fact, Shepard thought, her mind drawn back to Noveria and the Rachni, she should have been planning how to either get Jack back into custody once the mission was done, or failing that kill her as she had the children of the Rachni Queen and for exactly the same reason - Jack should be dangerously insane and that she wasn’t was a minor miracle. “I would expect that given her past…instead I’m finding that she’s desperately seeking guidance and wanting approval underneath all of her protective gesturing. Instead of being unempathetic, she was actually captured in an attempt to free other biotics from a Cerberus base.” Shepard shrugged, showing her bemusement with the situation, “I’m saying that despite the odds against it, she shows all the signs of being able to be a productive member of society. Her past doesn’t exonerate her of her crimes, but it does make me want to show her there’s more to life than the really terrible parts of it that she’s experienced so far.”

“I agree with Shepard,” Anderson stated with a grim look, “this young woman is as much of a victim as she is a criminal. You’re focused on justice for her crimes, but where is her justice for what Cerberus did to her as a child?”

Tevos unexpectedly intervened before Sparatus could respond to either of them, “Why don’t we see how she progresses under Spectre Shepard's influence,” Sparatus snorted derisively interrupting the matriarch, and causing her to pause to stare at him with a chill expression that had him focusing intently on his podium to escape it. It was all Shepard could do not to smirk at him, but she didn’t want that glare redirected her way. After a moment the asari Councilor continued, “We can make a decision regarding her future later, for now let us move onto the purpose of your activities on Korlus.”

“Korlus,” Shepard repeated, realizing that Vasir and M’Tara must have passed on her mention of it in relation to her skin irritation. “We stopped by Korlus to speak to Warlord Okeer about his contacts with the Collectors.” She went on to explain how the Blood Pack had decided to attack the Ragar Kalo, who were employing Okeer to produce krogan clones for them, mid-way during their
She then related how they had ended up fighting with Okeer and his clones against the Blood Pack forces under Warlord Garm, and how that cumulated in the deaths of both Warlords with Garm killing Okeer and then her killing Garm.

“Ahh,” Valern made a noise of satisfaction, “that is how you ended up turning in the bodies of both Warlord Okeer and Warlord Garm for their bounties. What of this clone that you mentioned, how exactly was he supposed to ignore the genophage?”

“From what we could piece together from Okeer’s notes Grunt possesses the necessary genetics to survive the genophage as well as being within the physical and mental ranges typically found in pre-genophage krogan of a few centuries of age.” She shrugged, “Okeer seemed obsessed with the idea that the Krogan as a race were growing weak because they in his words were coddling every krogan who simply managed to survive the genophage itself.”

“He is not immune to the genophage then?” Valern pressed for an unequivocal answer.

“No, he has the genophage,” Shepard confirmed to set his mind at ease, “it’s just that unlike the other clones Okeer was producing he could have been born naturally.”

“So he’s essentially just like every other krogan born since the genophage?” Anderson asked with a puzzled frown.

Shepard shrugged, “Along with a hint of eugenics, yes.”

“Strange,” Valern commented, a sentiment which Shepard could only agree with, “his research? Could it be used to produce more clones such as this Grunt?”

She shook her head, “No, the technology Okeer traded the Collectors for was genetic material and it was used up during the development of the clone. The only way Grunt can produce more like him is to produce little Grunts the natural way just like every other krogen male.” She was being purposefully blasé with this, the last thing she wanted was the Salarian Union getting unhealthily interested in the young krogan.

“Hmmph,” Sparatus snorted dismissively as he rejoined the conversation, “he is of no concern to us then. Let us move onto this Menvra Fund we discovered and its relationship to the Normandy Fund.”

Shepard frowned puzzled at this line of questioning, “Alright? What did you want to know?” She wasn’t entirely happy they knew already knew the name of the ship, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

Instead of Sparatus continuing, Tevos picked up the discussion, "At our request, Councilor Anderson forwarded the documentation Ambassador Udina sent to the Alliance as well as some relevant requisitions records, they were exceptionally informative." The asari Councilor's voice held an unusual undertone of displeasure that made Shepard rather wary. She was also completely caught off guard, why were they returning to the topic of Ambassador Udina? “To verify our information,” Tevos said next, “the Alliance refused to pay for any expenses related to non-Alliance members including even essentials such as food and medical supplies?”

“That is correct,” Shepard promptly responded, “I paid their salaries, food, medical supplies and any necessary medical bills out of the Normandy Fund.”
“I see,” Tevos responded after a moment, then she asked, “you were also never reimbursed for your initial weapons and armor purchase from Citadel Security’s Supplies and Requisitions after you were made a Spectre?”

“No, I was not Councilor,” she replied with a slight frown. Did that mean she should have been?

She had barely finished her reply to the asari Councilor before Councilor Valern asked the next question, "From these records, it appears you financed this Normandy Fund by surveying mineral deposits for the Alliance and turning over several significant archaeological finds to their respective governments for reward fees?"

Shepard nodded, "The crew would begin scanning the entire system as soon as the mission team left. After the mission was completed we would follow up on anything interesting they detected. We also refurbished and sold any weapons we seized to either the Alliance or Citadel Security."

"Yes," the salarian Councilor responded, not sounding particularly pleased, "It does seem to have been quite the profitable system you had set up to finance your primary mission...and also time consuming."

Ah, so that was his problem with it, and probably the fact that they had continued long after the point when it was strictly necessary. By then the crew had divided into three survey teams, one for each of the sensor stations available, and were informally competing against one another to see which team could locate the most resources the fastest. She hadn't wanted to call a stop to something which had turned into a game for them and was keeping morale up. "We tried to be as efficient as possible Councilor, but yes, it did take a small amount of time away from our efforts to find Saren.” Shepard decided to just cut short any accusation he might be trying to make that funding things took up so much time that it substantially impacted the total time it took to track Saren down. “I would like to point out though that the scanning and scavenging took up much less time than we spent docked at the Citadel trying to gather enough intelligence to figure out where Saren would turn up next and what exactly he was attempting to accomplish. Also, those funds were used to purchase supplies not available through the Alliance as well as non-standard armor and weapons for my ground team; without them we would have not prevailed against Saren's forces given the fact that we were generally heavily outnumbered by the Geth.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw Anderson cross his arms and scowl at the rest of the Council members, probably at the reminder of the sheer number of hours the two of them had spent searching for information.

Given his prolonged silence following her statement, Councilor Valern obviously hadn’t expected her to make a peremptory rebuttal of his assertion. "While I do not dispute that," the salarian finally commented, "my issue lies with the fact that you continued to accumulate credits after that point. Records show the Normandy Fund's total at disbursement was close to nine million credits."

"Morale," Shepard answered simply, drawing puzzled expressions from all four Councilors, even Anderson. "We started out of necessity and then the crew turned it into an informal competition between the three survey teams. Each team even worked out their own sensor algorithms trying to develop the most sensitive and accurate ones possible. Once we had the equipment we needed and the credits to buy enough supplies for four months, I let them continue with the caveat that we would only spend a maximum of three extra hours in any system since the entire crew was still intensely interested in the project." She smiled wryly, "That only encouraged them to develop plans to maximize the credits we could make in that amount of time by going to only the most promising finds and making multiple Mako drops and retrievals. Joker got very good at dropping the Mako close to the target location." She met the salarian Councilor's gaze and with all seriousness said, "That practice was one of the reasons he was able to successfully drop the Mako in a twenty-meter
landing zone on Ilos and one of the reasons I trusted him to make it." The other reason had been that
Joker hadn't been bragging when he said he was one of the best pilots in the Alliance Fleet, he was
that good.

The salarian considered her answer for a few seconds before nodding, "Very well, Captain Kirrahe
commented upon the lack of living space aboard the Normandy given the size of the crew. I can
understand why crew morale would have been of significant concern to you."

Shepard had to contain her amused smirk at his response. She would bet Kirrahe had commented
extensively upon both. Though grateful for their survival, the salarian STG Captain and his
surviving team members had been quite happy to leave their makeshift accommodations on the
Normandy's Storage deck for the more familiar and relatively spacious surroundings of an STG
vessel.

"I assume you are also unaware that Spectres receive a salary from the Citadel government as well as
the standard governmental employee benefits such as medical and disability insurance once they
cease any other prior employment?" Councilor Valern stated his question, making it clear he
expected only one response to it.

"I wasn't certain whether they did or not," Shepard admitted, "I couldn't find any information about a
salary figure at any rate." As for the other, she hadn't thought about medical insurance as most
companies only covered accidental injuries not combat related ones and the ones that did charged
ruinously high rates.

"We do not publish it," Councilor Valern responded, "but we do not expect our Spectres to fund
themselves," he continued, his tone rather dry. "They are supposed to be performing their duties, not
trying to figure out how they will get to their mission site, the equipment necessary to complete the
mission, or basic essentials such as food, shelter, clothing and medical care."

"Such a lack of funding would also make it difficult for us to compete against employment offers
from private companies and retain the services of our Spectres," Councilor Tevos added, her tone
just shy of condescending. Beside the asari, the salarian Councilor nodded his agreement with her
statement. Shepard fought the impulse to scowl at them. Yes, she should have asked them about
such things, but she still stood behind her reasons at the time for not doing so. Besides, it wasn't as if
they had mentioned anything to her either as her six-month window got shorter and she made no
comment about leaving the Alliance.

She was half expecting Councilor Tevos to ask the next question, but Councilor Sparatus spoke
instead, "Alliance records show that you went on no less than six missions for the Alliance at the
direct request of Admiral Hackett." The turian pointed at her and lectured, "This is why Spectres are
required to resign any prior military or governmental positions, they cannot be answerable to any
other authority but the Council's."

"I did," Shepard agreed readily, "and I do understand your point about clear lines of authority." She
sighed as she restrained the impulse to reach up and run her hand through her hair, especially since it
would only dislodge her hood. "And after dealing with said conflict of interest, I can definitely say
that I agree with it as well. However," she emphasized the word as she looked him back in the eye,
"I would also like to point out that accepting those missions worked out well for you, Councilors,"
she stated firmly.

"Why do you say that?" inquired Councilor Tevos, before anyone else spoke.
"When the Normandy showed up at Acturus station and asked for the Alliance's help Admiral Hackett agreed to do so. When I gave my tactical assessment that the Geth would micro-jump to flank him unless he dealt with them first and recommended that he do so with the assistance of the remaining Citadel Fleet, he followed my recommendation without any further questioning. I'm not sure either would have happened without the goodwill I cultivated with him by agreeing to investigate those situations and resolving them successfully," she answered frankly.

The three original Councilors didn't look as if they liked her answer, but they did seem to accept it, which indicated they had been surprised when the Alliance intervened to help them. They should be, Shepard hadn't been certain Admiral Hackett would follow her suggestion as the Alliance military generally did not hold the Council in high regard. Humanity had agreed to the Treaty of Fari xen, which limited their production of dreadnought class ships, on the assurance that the Citadel Fleet would assist in protecting human colonies if they were ever attacked. However, the Council had yet to ever act to protect any human settlement during any attack in all the time they had been associate members. The widely accepted sentiment in the Alliance military was that it was unlikely they ever would and in reality humanity was effectively on its own unless maybe Earth or Bekenstein, as it was so close to the Citadel, was ever directly attacked. Their refusal to help after Saren and the Geth attacked Eden Prime had only strengthened that viewpoint, thus asking the Fifth Fleet to help the Citadel Fleet's flagship had been a fairly significant request for her to make.

On the other hand, Shepard’s thoughts wandered to the viewpoint she had learned was prevalent outside of Alliance space; the Alliance had claimed more planets than the Volus, who had four times the population, and then placed tiny colonies on each of them. They hadn’t bothered to make sure each colony was large enough to defend itself against pirates and slavers, which for the rest of the galaxy meant a population nearing a million or so colonists, before seeding the next one. From the viewpoint of the Hierarchy, which provided the great majority of the Patrol Fleet, the Systems Alliance was trying to abuse the letter of the Treaty to colonize more far more planets than they would be able to otherwise and had brought their problems with slavers and pirates upon themselves due to their irresponsible expansionism. Then, when their poorly defended undersized colonies were unsurprisingly attacked, they expected the turians of the Citadel Patrol Fleet to risk their lives defending them, something they were loath to do.

Shepard thought both sides were a bit right and a bit wrong. The Alliance had colonized so many planets in order to claim as many as they thought they would need in the next few centuries to prevent the Hegemony from boxing the Alliance into a small area of space. That naturally resulted in the Alliance having far too many planets to defend with their numbers, which in turn forced them to rely more on the Patrol Fleet than any other member of Citadel Space. By contrast, if they had colonized more like the Asari or Turians, the Alliance would probably have about four colony worlds with decent sized populations by now and would have easily been able to defend them from slaver and pirate attacks verses what actually happened, which was they became a favored target. However, the only reason they were in that situation in the first place was because of the nature of the area of space that the Citadel had given them to colonize. The Council had intentionally put them in direct competition for planets with the Hegemony, apparently thinking that would slow down the Alliance’s expansionism. Instead, contrary to the advice given them by the Council, who advocated a cautious approach to colonization, the Alliance had continued their rapid expansion, ignoring all warnings about the risks to their colonists inherent in it.

Quite frankly, she thought the Alliance would have been better off in the long run if they had followed the Council’s advice. They had far overestimated the ability of the Hegemony to colonize anything quickly for one thing, and now colonist and dangerous were almost synonymous in most human’s minds which greatly depressed colonization rates. That in turn meant their colonies weren’t growing quickly, which meant they remained vulnerable and teming targets. And the turians of the
Patrol Fleet were still not minded to risk their lives because of the Alliance’s exceptionally poor colonization policies.

“This new Menvra Fund you’ve setup as a salvage company on Illium, what is its purpose?” Anderson’s question pulled her out of her wandering thoughts, she was starting to feel the fatigue of a very long day and a full stomach dragging her down.

“Paying out salaries for the ground team,” she replied after a second’s worth of gathering her thoughts, “any necessary medical expenses for the crew, general expenses for the mission, and upgrades to the ship. At the end of the mission the remainder of the funds will be paid out to all the surviving members of the crew or their designated beneficiaries on a 40 60 split with sixty percent going to the ground team members and forty percent to the ship’s crew.”

Anderson frowned at her answer, but it was Tevos who first asked for clarification, “To what extent is Cerberus supporting your mission?”

She glanced back over at the asari’s hologram, “They provided the ship and its crew as well as paying their salaries, and an operating fund of 50,000 credits a month. They’re also providing dossiers on suggested members for my ground team.”

“So,” Anderson spoke up again, his expression showing his disbelief, “Cerberus expects you to stop the Collectors with a civilian run ship and a hastily put together ground team - and on top of that expects you to fund the majority of the mission expenses yourself?”

Shepard let out a quiet laugh and then gave him an evil smirk, “I did say I thought we were ultimately expendable…but honestly I think TIM got miffed when I painted over his shiny white, orange, and black Cerberus color scheme with matte black and grey anti-reflective LADAR absorbing paint, removed the multiple Cerberus logos from the publicly visible sections of the ship, and changed the name from SSV Normandy SR-2 to MSV Menvra.” She paused for a second and then dryly added, “I’m pretty sure I was supposed to be an advertisement for Cerberus on the side.”

Valern blinked a few times at that, “He intended you to complete the mission in an obviously identifiable Cerberus ship?”

Shepard could only shrug a bit helplessly, she couldn’t figure out the reasoning behind it either. “I know, I don’t know how he expected that to work out with the bounty. However, this does seem like a good moment to bring up the subject of upgrades for the Menvra,” she said getting their attention. “The Collector ship’s attack on the Normandy went right through the barriers and standard Alliance ships armoring. Given that the Menvra is made with essentially the same technology and materials, it seems critical that I get those upgraded as soon as possible before facing them again.”

“I agree given how quickly the Normandy was critically damaged,” Anderson responded. “I don’t know of anything other than a larger drive core that would provide you with stronger barriers, but Silaris armor should give you a better chance of survival.” He shrugged, “If it doesn’t, then I don’t know what would, that’s the best ships armoring available. As for weapons, the Hierarchy has been working on a frigate sized main cannon based on Sovereign’s technology called the Thanix cannon…”

“Certainly not!” Sparatus angrily interrupted him, “not on a Cerberus ship where they can study the technology!”

“I would suspect they already have access to it,” Valern commented, which prompted Sparatus to
turn and stare at him in dismayed surprise, “the Shadow Broker offered the relevant engineering data to any buyer with the appropriate funds approximately two months ago.” Sparatus reacted to that news with an angry growl which the salarian Councilor seemed to ignore as he turned to Shepard and continued, “You also might want to check with your quarian friend, Tali’Zorah vas Neema,” Councilor Valern advised her, “the Quarians have been doing some interesting research on modifying shipboard shield emitters to produce an oscillating barrier system instead of a static one. Our information reports indicate that the results of their research efforts are very promising and should be most suitable for frigate sized ships.”

“Alright, thank you for the information,” Shepard said as she wondered whether or not he had gotten that information from the Shadow Broker as well or from the STG.

“Well,” Shepard turned toward Anderson as he began speaking, “between the armoring and oscillating barriers that should offer some survivability against the Collectors. Now the question is how to get them on your ship?”

“Ah,” Shepard grinned in response, “the fortunate thing about paying for it myself is that I can chose where to have it done. Considering I paid a rather outrageous three million for the LADAR absorbing paint job from Cerberus, I was planning on looking for someone else to do the rest of the work.” She glanced over at the other three Council members’ holograms, “I don't suppose any of you might have some recommendations on where I might want to get the ship refitted with Silaris armoring? A place where while the refit is going on perhaps the shipwrights might take the opportunity to search for any odd monitoring and transmitting devices that might have been installed on the ship.”

Councilor Valern’s thin lips curved into a smile, “Illium has some excellent shipyard facilities,” he looked over toward Councilor Tevos, “I believe we could recommend a contractor to meet your needs.”

“Really,” Shepard drawled after the asari Councilor nodded in agreement, “If you could forward me your recommendations I’d appreciate it.” STG and RIS agents together? That should be rather interesting, at least what one didn’t catch the other probably would…provided they informed one another. Hopefully they would still disable or remove anything they found even if they didn’t mention it outside their own group.

“Now as to the shackled AI onboard your ship…” Valern moved onto the next subject.

Shepard silently groaned upon hearing that, this was definitely not going to be as short of a meeting as she had hoped.
Tela stared pensively at the display screen which showed what was currently going on in the other conference room. The Council was going to agree to Shepard’s proposal, she had known that from the moment Shepard had confronted Sparatus, clearly laying out the reasoning for letting her continue this charade with Cerberus to find out what exactly was on the other side of the Omega 4 Relay. To either prove or disprove if she had really understood the message on the beacon…and whether or not these Reapers actually existed.

“They’re going to let her go,” Alena commented from beside her, not sounding very pleased about it at all.

Vasir knew that her fellow Spectre and friend had been particularly concerned by all the evidence that indicated that Shepard was having a very difficult time dealing with her reconstructed body. The weight loss, the skin irritation - and worse the evidence that she was actively avoiding looking at herself to the extent that she hadn’t noticed either. “Yes, they are,” Tela confirmed, “if everything she’s been telling us about how she learned her new biotic abilities and about the Protheans is true, then she probably didn’t misunderstand that beacon message.” Tela crossed her arms, she couldn’t believe she was actually saying this, “And that means these Reapers she’s been talking about might just be real.” She heard the thread of fear in her voice, the hint of it in her scent as she said the words. She had been a Spectre now for nearly three hundred years, not much made her truly afraid these days, but the thought of thousands of ships like the one that had attacked the Citadel invading…yes that was certainly cause for fear.

She saw Alena turn and stare at her with an unusually serious expression on her face, “They can’t be, I know they are refitting every ship but…” her voice trailed off.

Tela understood exactly what the other matron meant; if both Shepard and Dr. Nuwani were right, then these Reapers did this every 50,000 years, harvesting all space-faring races and somehow using their genetic material to create more of themselves. They had eradicated the Protheans and countless other races before them - far more would be needed to defeat them than just refitting the Republics’
Fleet to the latest technology.

Perhaps Shepard was wrong though, the matron thought hopefully, or perhaps she was overstating what she knew from the Cipher? She was a talented actress, they had seen that earlier…but, Tela’s brief moment of hope flitted away, the changes in her aura, that was not something that acting out a role could possibly affect. The human’s aura shifted and altered in ways an aura shouldn’t be able to do as Shepard reached into those memories within the Cipher. Then just minutes ago, with the news that the Collectors may have once been Protheans, they had witnessed evidence from Shepard’s reaction that, far from being just bits and pieces of memory, the Cipher seemed to contain full personalities in addition to their memories. That would at least partially explain why Shepard’s aura altered as it did whenever she accessed the Cipher. No, the nais decided, Shepard might be overstating what she knew, but she was not making up that cluster of memories in her human mind where asari would store memories from their meld partner.

Alena scowled, “And we are putting all of that responsibility on one human…one who died and the was brought back, one who isn’t really dealing with everything associated around that very well, and, as we’ve just seen, one who has the memories and personalities of multiple centuries old Protheans rattling around in her maiden’s mind.” In the next instant the tall lavender asari allowed with a sigh, “Alright, she is doing rather well considering its only been twelve days and her circumstances are far from ideal for her recovery. Still, it’s far too much to put on one human…well any one person really, especially considering how critical this may prove to be for all of us and not just the Alliance.”

Vasir made a slight sound of agreement, the only reason the humans had been given a Council seat was to teach them that they were not yet ready for it, that their ambitions far outstripped their ability to actually fulfill the demands that would be placed on them as a Council member. That said though, “I doubt the Council will assign only Shepard to this,” Tela commented, “and I’d like to point out that this particular human has already done more than she was supposed to be able to accomplish when they made her a probationary Spectre to appease the Alliance. She managed to stay on the track of Saren, something the STG didn’t even manage,” she added with a slight smile, “despite being limited to whatever intelligence resources she gained on her own and the Alliance’s, and, if she’s right, she managed to stop the Reapers invasion two years ago.”

“And what?” Alena shot back, “we’re supposed to press our luck, and hers, even further on the hope that she can repeat it? I’d like to remind you she’s already died once going up against the Collectors because of the Council sending her off with one ship on a mission that should have been assigned to an entire scouting group.”

“They could have hardly known about the Collectors,” Tela protested, though she did wonder at the Council’s choice herself, they had probably sent Shepard and her crew off to keep them from talking about the Reapers too much in public. When the Collectors had offered enough credits the Shadow Broker had doubtless found a way to track their location and then happily turned over the information to the Collectors. Someday she knew, the Broker would make a mistake and she would get the information she needed for RIS to track him or her down to their lair and then take over their entire operation. RIS running the Shadow Broker’s entire operation, that had so much potential for the Republics, she just had to be patient.

“No,” Alena agreed drawing her attention back to her fellow Spectre, “but I’m wondering if it’s in the back of her mind. You’ll notice she didn’t come here just to report to the Council, she came here to offer them something she knew they wouldn’t turn down in return for letting her continue the mission she’s been on ever since she activated that beacon on Eden Prime.”
“Stopping the Reapers,” Tela responded after a moment, recognizing the truth of it. She glanced over at her fellow Spectre, “You realize if we put her on medical leave like you want she would just try to break out of the hospital.” She thought about it for a moment and then added, “And with her new biotic abilities courtesy of those Prothean memories she would probably succeed too.” She shook her head, “The thought of how she’s been blithely flash stepping as if there were no danger to it…”

“It’s a wonder she hasn’t stepped into something,” Alena finished her thought and the two of them shared a look. “You know I’m right though, the safest thing at this point is for her not to try and back track and start thinking too much about what she’s doing when she flash-steps.”

Tela scowled, “How about not doing it at all until she,” she emphasized the word, “actually understands what she’s doing. You and I spent decades learning how to flash step and we are still cautious when executing it because we understand the risks associated with the skill.” M’Tara just shot her a look in reply to that and Vasir sighed, “I know, it’s too much of a tactical advantage for her not to use it. At least she could start being a bit more cautious in her end placement, she doesn’t have to step within inches of walls when she doesn’t absolutely need to.”

Alena made a noise of agreement and then returned to the subject of Shepard’s current status, “She wouldn’t be on medical leave for that long. She just needs a month or so to fully recover from her injuries and learn how to control those memories.” She then added, “You saw Dr. T’Rani’s report,” to make her point.

Tela had indeed, seen Dr. T’Rani’s report. It had been sobering to read, almost half of the human’s body had been replaced in some manner or augmented with cybernetics to ensure its continued functioning. Even her tale about being frozen seemed to be the truth given the evidence the doctor had found in the scans of her body and augmented eezo nodes. Physical evidence which matched up exactly to what had been observed in the experiments the Republics had done a few centuries ago on their frozen specimens. Tela couldn’t imagine how in the world Shepard was dealing with everything as well as she was plus the weight of her current mission. Certainly, the human must have a great deal of inner strength, and she couldn’t help but wonder what it would like to dip within the human’s mind. “I wonder what it would be like to meld with her,” she spoke her thought aloud, “she must have a very strong mind to be able to have accomplished what she has so far.”

“Given her scent earlier, stressed, worried and tired. I wouldn’t be surprised to find her mind full of her fears and concerns,” Alena answered with an uncharacteristically serious response for her.

She turned to look at the taller asari with look of interest, “You really do like her, it isn’t just because Tevos ordered us to befriend her.”

“And you don’t?” Alena instantly challenged her in return, “You ordered enough food for six, and cajoled her into eating far more than she desired.”

Tela smirked, not at all embarrassed by her friends pointed observation, “She is a very interesting and unique individual. Tevos may have ordered us to get closer to her, but I would have desired to know her better in any case.”

M’Tara inclined her head in agreement, “Indeed, it’s lucky I happened to be on the Citadel when Tevos needed another Senior Spectre who was also a strong biotic, otherwise it might have been quite some time before I happened to meet with her.” The taller asari smirked teasingly at her, “You’ll notice she’s yet another human female that appreciates my markings and voice.”
Vasir made a dismissive sound at that, it was a bit annoying how easily Alena managed to attract the attention of human women. Her height, unusual natural markings and deeper voice gave her rather of an unfair advantage over the rest of them.

“Well you can’t fault her dedication to her crew,” M’Tara bemusedly commented moments later, pulling Tela out of her thoughts.

“Hmm?” the nais turned her attention to the display screen, wondering what she had missed that caused Alena to react that way.

“She’s making an effort to persuade the Council to not deactivate the AI on her ship that’s spying on everyone at the end of her mission,” Alena’s voice held a mixture of disbelief and amusement.

“What?” Tela incredulously asked as she returned her full attention to the discussion going on next door.

“I am simply saying that EDI has been extremely helpful so far,” Shepard was saying, “she operated a reconnaissance drone and provided valuable intelligence for our mission on Korlus.”

“She is not a she!” Sparatus growled, “she is nothing more than a machine!”

“She,” the human emphasized the word, “is both useful and needed, certainly none of my crew members possess the level of skill necessary to shut out another AI out of our electronic systems.”

“An AI to combat an AI,” Valern interrupted the argument, “that could prove useful provided that the AI their combating does not hack them and take them over.”

“In which case the AI in question would be capable of taking over ship’s systems anyway,” Shepard was quick to point out to the salarian Councilor. “Sophisticated computer systems are required to run today’s ships and are vulnerable to electronic attacks of various kinds which is why we protect them with electronic defenses and countermeasures. An AI will be more effective at that task than a crew person at an interface.”

“Provided they don’t just side with another AI and give the ship over to them!” Sparatus countered in an angry growl. “Did you learn nothing from what happened two years ago with the Geth?”

“EDI is not a Geth, her development was not accidental,” Shepard rebutted, “and she is currently shackled. While I find her instructions to summarize what happens on-board the ship annoying and intrusive, I still do not feel that her intent is malicious in any way.”

Unlike Shepard, who was unaware of the current conversational undercurrents, both Vasir and M’Tara quite aware of them and the history behind them. About a decade before the Geth War the Salarian Union had proposed and won approval for the development of an experimental AI primarily for just this propose over the objections of the then turian Councilor, Councilor Galus, and with the ambivalent support of Councilor Tevos. The first AI units had been developed just before the war began and were operational when the news broke about the Geth War. Tevos had promptly shifted from ambivalent to anti-AI and sided with Councilor Galus to forbid all further AI development within Citadel space…which left the question of what to do with the AI that the Salarians had just developed. Before the Council could complete their deliberations on the subject however, the C-Sec personnel assigned to guard the units had destroyed them. The entire squad had been reprimanded and the turian C-Sec squad leader who had ordered his squad to open fire, a relative of Councilor Galus, had been dismissed from C-Sec for not waiting upon the Council’s final decision. That
however, didn’t change the fact that the AIs, who until then had shown no sign of aggression toward their organic creators, had been destroyed. The Union had blamed the Hierarchy for what happened and the fact that the turian who had done it had been placed in a fairly high governmental position upon his return to the Hierarchy had not helped matters.

“I say we wait,” Anderson interrupted the ongoing argument, “see what happens with this AI and make our decision then when we have more information than we do now.”

“That is a reasonable suggestion,” Valern instantly agreed with him, and turned toward Tevos to get her reaction.

The asari Councilor glanced over at Anderson for a moment and then Shepard before she said, “Very well, I see no reason why we need to make this decision at this time.”

Seeing that he was outvoted and that Tevos was not going to support him, Sparatus growled, “You will regret giving that thing so much time to determine how to kill all you and escape.”

“Perhaps,” Shepard responded to him, “or perhaps I’ll be pleasantly surprised by her, I have been so far.”

Tela and Alena exchanged surprised glances at that, and then Alena bemusedly commented with a shrug, “Well…she is supposed to have an open mind when it comes to non-humans. I guess that extends to non-organic as well, even after her experiences with the Geth.”

The remainder of the meeting was taken up with the more mundane details of exactly how Shepard was to keep the Council apprised of her progress in finding a way through the Omega 4 relay. How she might be allowed into League space - probably with an escort - though the human hadn’t appeared very happy with that possibility. Finally, they discussed reinstating Shepard’s Spectre status. After some back and forth the Council agreed to provisionally re-instate it with several caveats given her current Cerberus associates. Shepard was not permitted to dock her ship with its Cerberus crew at any Citadel world without pre-authorization, and they were not permitted on the Citadel at all. Shepard herself was not permitted on the Citadel without authorization from a Council member who would then notify the Council and Spectre Office of the times of her visit so that she could be met at customs by one of them and escorted to where she would change out of her Cerberus provided armor and provided replacement clothing of her choosing for the duration of her stay. Tela and Alena glanced at each other with matching frowns at that, but Shepard herself didn’t seem to be too bothered with the restriction.

12 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel, Presidium

Shepard still wasn’t happy with the idea of having an escort the entire time they were within League space. However, she could see Tevos’ point that the Warlords would not trust her Cerberus crew without the guarantee of their people being able to keep them under direct observation at all times. She had learned from the asari Councilor that the Republics had indeed determined that Cerberus was trying to develop an anti-biotic bio-weapon. The League had determined that as well, which was why they had offered bounties for any Cerberus personnel caught within their territory. They wanted as many eyes as possible searching for the human terrorists in the hope that it would either deter or stop an attack. Tevos had given no hint of what the Republics was doing about Cerberus, but Shepard did not doubt they were also running their own anti-Cerberus operation.

“What’s bothering you?” Alena inquired from where she was leaning against the elevator wall.
Once the Council meeting had ended, it hadn’t made any sense to make one of the acolytes bring over tea and cookies for them so instead the three Spectres had decided to walk over to the Consort’s compound. Right now, they were descending to the ground floor of the Citadel Tower, from there they would make their way to the Presidium exit.

“I’m wondering how to keep my identity and the identity of the ship under wraps if the League decides that we do have to be escorted as Councilor Tevos suspects they will,” Shepard admitted. “If it becomes widely known that we’re humans on technologically advanced ship then chances are we’ll have issues with both pirates and slavers anywhere outside of League space.”

“That could be a problem,” Vasir acknowledged from her other side. “I guess you are pretending to be asari out there?” she asked the question with a dry tone.

“I’m not bad at it,” Shepard emphasized the I part of her statement. She knew full well that in the past she had usually been the exception rather than the rule in their special ops ‘asari’ mercenary groups. The guys had generally…well, sucked at it, which was not a great surprise. Fortunately for them, the asari out in the Terminus were generally generous when it came to letting a small group of humans try to blend in among them. Though as Jack had noted on Korlus that was sometimes due to the fact they wanted to get in their pants and hoped for a bit of sexual quid pro quo.

Tela laughed at that, “So I’ve heard,” the nais commented with slight smile curving her dark blue lips and a brief sweeping glance of Amanda’s body.

Shepard noticed the curiosity and intrigue in the matron’s brown eyes as the asari looked her up and down, and it made Shepard wonder if both Senior Spectres were interested in her instead of only one. It was flattering if a bit disconcerting as well, as asari matrons had a bit of a reputation for the strategic, and sometimes outright manipulative, ways they pursued individuals they picked out as a potential donor partner for their future child. She also wondered exactly where and when the other Spectre had come across that bit of knowledge, but before Shepard could figure out how to get the information she desired the elevator came to a halt and its doors slid open. The three of them exited and then headed down the hallway toward the Presidium ground entrance.

“They have a vested interest in you succeeding,” Vasir carefully continued their conversation once they were outside and a bit away from everyone else, “I’ll speak with the matriarch, emphasize the danger of your identity becoming common knowledge.”

“I will as well,” M’Tara added, “Your right that the technology in your ship, especially the stealth technology, would be something that not only pirates, but also some of the non-League Warlords might be interested in as well for themselves as well as to sell to the Batarians. That’s technology that neither the Citadel or League will want the Hegemony to get access to, so both governments will have an interest in making sure it stays out of their hands - which means keeping your identity well hidden, even if they are escorting you.”

“True, that’s a valid point,” Tela nodded in agreement, looking impressed with the other matron’s spur of the moment reasoning. “Might be a good idea to come up with an asari name for yourself and for your mercenary group.” Vasir continued developing the idea. “Your best cover story would be as a mercenary group hired by the Lero Lineage, which would explain why Councilor Tevos would vouch for you to the League Warlords and why you would merit an escort to ensure the successful completion of your mission.”

“Oh, that’s good,” M’Tara complemented her fellow Spectre, “with the Lero Lineage backing her no one would even ask why they were hired.”
Shepard had to quietly laugh at the cover story they were developing for her as was essentially the same one she had used as a special forces operative…minus the well-known, amazingly rich, once noble Thessian Lineage hiring them for some unknown reason. That would have been entirely too attention getting and would have risked someone inquiring with said Lineage about the activities of their hired mercenaries - which probably wouldn’t have turned out well for them when the Lineage in question sent Commandoes inquiring why they were making free with their Lineage’s name. In any case, this was all provisionally based on whether or not Councilor Tevos, and the Potinia of her Lineage, would even agree to it and Shepard had no way of even guessing how likely that might prove to be even with the other two Spectres backing it. As they crossed from one side of the Presidium to the other, the two asari Spectres helpfully suggested one name after another. By the time that the three of them stepped off the bridge that spanned the lake in the center of the Presidium and chose the curving path to the left which led to the Consort’s compound, Amanda Shepard turned into Am’da Saria, a common Lineage name used by several different families from the Serrice area, and a new mercenary unit had been created, Teukria’s Company, after the famous ancient asari archer.

Finally, they reached the Consort’s compound and walked through the wide entrance archway, designed to let two elcor walk side by side, into the building itself. The green eyes of the asari greeter behind the reception desk widened at the sight of the three of them in their formal blue and silver Spectre uniforms. The light blue complexioned nais collected herself quickly though, stepping out from behind the desk to greet them with a bow and a polite, “Salaa, Spectres, Consort Sha’ira awaits you in the meditation gardens.” A sweep of her arm indicated the direction and the three of them followed along behind her as the maiden lead the way to where the Consort awaited them. The maiden they were following was not one that Shepard recognized from any of her previous visits two years ago. Unfortunately Nelyna, the maiden who had greeted her that first day, had not been at work the day of the Battle of the Citadel and had died during the fighting on the station along with her sister, Saphyria, who had been one of the Embassy receptionists. Shepard had attended the memorial service Sha’ira had held for both of the two maidens before leaving on her mission to hunt down Geth.

Shepard felt herself almost automatically relaxing as they entered the gardens, the familiar hues of bluish-green leafed shrubs, fern-like, short, thick-trunked trees, and brilliant blue, white, green and yellow flowers very familiar to her. She had spent many an hour here away from any prying eyes just relaxing or trying to figure out what she needed to do next in her pursuit of Saren. A few turns through the thickly planted garden and they reached one of the several private grottoes skillfully spaced throughout the area. Sha’ira was waiting for them there, looking just as beautiful Shepard remembered, tall and slender and somehow the epitome of elegance and grace even while standing still.

The Consort’s gaze fixed upon Shepard and Amanda could see that Sha’ira’s keen, deep-blue eyes were taking in everything as she approached from the unhealed areas on her cheeks to most likely the fact that she looked a bit gaunt in uniform. Their gazes met and Shepard could see the moment when Sha’ira accepted that it was actually her for the nais smiled, a bright joyous expression that clearly told of the Consort’s happiness at seeing her alive. The open warmth and sincerity of the matron’s welcome hit Amanda right in the chest, stealing her breath for a brief moment. “Salaa Spectres,” Sha’ira greeted them as they drew closer, then she focused her attention on Shepard alone.

“Amanda,” she stepped forward and then paused, curiosity and concern ghosting over her expression as she tilted her head briefly from side to side. For a second or two Shepard was puzzled by this, but then she realized the nais was sensing her changed aura. Sha’ira’s expression settled into warm concern and the asari took the last few steps forward. She stared for a long moment into Amanda’s silver eyes, and then lifted one blue hand and cupped her cheek.
The Consort’s presence seemed to envelop Shepard, the warm concern in her deep blue eyes, the distinctive lightly spicy and floral fragrance of her perfume, the care in her gentle touch. Amanda allowed herself a sorely needed moment of vulnerability, closing her eyes and leaning ever so slightly into Sha’ira’s hand soaking in the comfort of the matron’s presence. She heard the Consort exhale startled sounding breath and went to pull away, but then Sha’ira moved closer, wrapping her arms around Amanda and pulling her into a full body hug. The realization that this was the first time anyone had hugged her since she had woken hit Amanda hard, bringing incipient tears to her eyes. She wrapped her arms around the slightly taller matron and turned her head so that her betraying emotions were hidden against Sha’ira’s neck and shoulder.

She had no idea what the two asari Spectres with her thought of this and honestly right at this moment she didn’t give a damn about their opinions. This was the first time she felt that someone welcomed her back just for herself, without any overwhelming expectations of what she could do for them. Sha’ira had no such expectations of her, in fact, the Consort had gone out of her way two years ago to bring out Amanda’s artistic side once she had learned about it by way of a casually made comment concerning a guitar-like musical instrument the asari had been carrying one day. Yes, Joker and Chakwas had warmly welcomed her back, but that had been as their Commander Shepard, leading them in the ongoing fight against the threat of the Reapers. She knew that was not really Joker or Chakwas’ fault as she didn’t let them see, or even know, about the other side of herself. That didn’t change the fact however, that as unfair as it was to them, Sha’ira’s greeting meant more to her, hit her on a more personal level, than theirs.

Sha’ira’s arms around her shifted, one tightening around her back to pull her closer and the other sliding up to wrap around her shoulders as the nais’s head tilted so that her cheek rest against the side of Shepard’s head. The Consort’s aura altered as well somehow giving the sense of wrapping protectively around her and Amanda became aware with her newly expanded sensitivity to them that the asari’s aura was almost as strong as her own, and Vasir’s and M’Tara’s for that matter. That indicated Sha’ira was almost as strong a biotic as any of the three Spectres, something that surprised Amanda. Apparently, the way the Consort had been slinging around singularities and warps all the while maintaining a very strong barrier during the Battle of the Citadel hadn’t been just an adrenaline-fueled fluke. Then she decided that it simply didn’t matter and let herself enjoy the feeling of it, she had no idea you could do such a thing with your aura and it felt…very nice actually, very comforting and reassuring. It was somewhat like what the three Spectres had done in the shuttle when they harmonized their auras with her own, but felt much more protective than the ‘we’re all friends here’ sense that she had gotten from the other. Protectiveness, it wasn’t necessarily something that she would have once associated with the elegant and graceful Consort, but after seeing Sha’ira fight to protect her acolytes and those who had taken shelter within the compound Shepard had no doubt she was entirely capable of backing it up with action if necessary.

Shepard allowed herself to luxuriate in Sha’ira’s embrace, soaking in the feeling of being held, touched, and cared for by another. To be able to do this without being concerned that someone would review a recording of it later and plot how to use it against her felt like a personal indulgence after the past nearly two weeks of being constantly under watch by Cerberus’s on-board monitoring equipment and tattled on by the shackled EDI. Finally, and with a regretful sigh, she loosening her arms. Sha’ira slowly released her, though the asari didn’t let her entirely retreat, holding onto her arms and giving her a keen look before leaning forward and brushing her lips across her forehead. As Amanda glanced at her questioningly in surprise, the Consort released her, took a step back and then with a graceful motion of her right arm directed her attention to where a table with four chairs awaited them. Vasir and M’Tara were already seated and had been served small platters of Merikewi cookies and a cup of Tuweapoda tea by the acolyte who stood nearby with a serving cart. Shepard was pretty sure the maiden was supposed to be being unobtrusive, but the wide smile that
“Carya,” the maiden’s warm smile was infectious, and Shepard couldn’t help but smile back as she greeted the nais who was one of Sha’ira’s Eliaon practitioners.

“Amanda,” Carya greeted her in return, “the others wanted me to pass on their pleasure at hearing that you were still alive and were well enough now to visit with us.”

Shepard felt her smile slip slightly, but then she quickly recovered. “Thank you,” she replied sincerely, “tell them I look forward to hopefully seeing them again sometime soon depending on my schedule.” So that was what the Council was saying publicly? What were they saying about her funeral? Where they saying they had thought she had been dead, but then became aware that she was not or something else? What exactly was her cover story here? Shepard hoped that she had covered her slip well enough but from the way Carya’s smile had noticeably dimmed it seemed she had been less than successful in hiding her reaction.

Vasir sighed in a rather purposeful way drawing everyone’s attention, “Where Shepard has been the past two years, and what exactly happened to her is restricted information for now. In accordance with your vows as consorts, your silence concerning anything you learn about these events is greatly appreciated by the Council.” That was interesting noted Shepard, she had never heard about the consorts taking vows, but it did fit in with everything she had heard about their reputation for keeping their client’s secrets secret.

Sha’ira deep blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully on the other matron and then she dipped her head and replied, “As always we respect the privacy of those that are both our clients and those that seek the shelter of our walls and have been given it as guests.” Her gaze shifted to Shepard, “And especially to those that have become something more to us by their character and actions than just an occasional guest.”

Both asari Spectres looked a bit startled at that and Alena commented, “Shepard mentioned that she and her team had assisted you during the Battle of the Citadel, you mean to give her permanent guest right here?”

“I do,” Sha’ira affirmed as she met Amanda’s startled light grey eyes, “she will always be freely welcomed within my walls.”

That had a rote sense of formality to it, Shepard thought, and it seemed very familiar to her both from her Greek history and, interestingly enough, from Prothean history as well. ‘You need to accept and state your understanding of your responsibilities toward your gracious host,’ Lindariel’s voice sternly echoed in her mind. ‘I gratefully accept your offer of hospitality and will always act as befits a guest within these walls and with respect toward you and yours.’ Much to Shepard’s surprise, instead of being pleased Sha’ira reacted to her statement with a startled expression that shifted into disapproval just before she turned toward Spectres Vasir and M’Tara.

“Yes, her aura shifts and alters like a school of xayea in open waters,” Alena responded to her unspoken question. That gave Shepard a strong clue as to what had surprised the matron, but why was she now unhappy with them?

“And that especially falls under restricted information,” Tela quickly added, “and no, we had nothing to do with this.” She stressed the nothing in an irritated tone.

“It does however allow us to ask Consort Sha’ira for her assistance in teaching Amanda the proper
meditation techniques to deal with zeukeso,” Alena calmly noted as she picked up another cookie and popped it in her mouth.

“From what I just felt, she should have been trained in these techniques months ago,” the Consort said, sounding quite uncharacteristically stern, “and whichever nais is responsible for this should have also taken on the responsibility of training her in the techniques so that their memories never affected her to this extent.”

Shepard decided that she needed to explain what she could about what was actually going on with her and her aura to Sha’ira. She looked over apologetically at Carya waiting by the cart, “I know you have taken a vow as well as a consort, but perhaps the fewer who are present right now the better and is there anyone else present in the garden?”

Sha’ira turned back toward her with a slight frown and stared at her searchingly for a long moment before finally replying, “No there is not, perhaps we should sit down and let Carya serve us and then she can retire for the evening.” At the last she turned apologetically toward her acolyte.

Carya smiled reassuringly at both of them, “Of course, I will also instruct the rest of the acolytes to avoid the gardens until you are finished.”

“Thank you, Carya,” the Consort responded, and then with a graceful wave of her arm she motioned for Shepard to take a seat.

Joining the other two Spectres at the table, Shepard seated herself nearest M’Tara while Sha’ira sat down in the one remaining seat between Vasir and her. As soon as Carya finished serving them all and had left Amanda turned toward Sha’ira. “No asari is responsible for my zeukeso as it is related to my contact with the beacons,” she very carefully phrased her statement to be entirely truthful and yet obscure the actual truth. Sha’ira frowned at her answer, spurring Amanda to hurriedly continue, “The personality you just felt affecting my aura was Prothean not Asari, and it would be a bit difficult for her to train me considering how long she’s been deceased.” Shepard considered the matter for a moment and then added, “Plus I don’t think they were affected by zeukeso or anything like it so it probably wouldn’t have occurred to her.”

“Prothean,” Sha’ira sounded understandably startled, then, “I thought the beacon only gave you a troubling vision of what had happened to them?”

“It’s been an…” she paused to consider what word to use and finally settled on one, “unusual two years. A lot has happened to me during that time.” Alena snorted in amusement at her answer, then took another sip of her tea and proceeded to take one of Shepard’s cookies off her plate as the tall asari had already finished her own. Shepard stared at the nais in surprise then pulled her plate closer to herself as she grabbed one of the blue and white stripped round cookies. Tela watching the two of them sighed and pushed her own plate toward the center of the table. Lifting the cookie up to her mouth Amanda inhaled the slight floral fragrance, somewhat like lilac she mused, then popped the flavorful cookie into her mouth where it just seemed to dissolve upon her tongue.

Sha’ira watched the interplay between the three of them with keen interest, and perhaps a slight bit of amusement. After a moment she repeated thoughtfully, “Prothean memory imprints. I understand now why you want to limit this knowledge to as few as possible. In order to do that you must master the meditation exercises because the changes in your aura whenever you think of them currently are entirely too noticeable to any asari, and that will give rise to unwanted speculation. Fortunately, the technique is not difficult to learn and it should only take you a short while to understand it.”
Shepard popped another cookie into her mouth, the sugar at least would help her stave off the growing lethargy in her limbs and mind. It was now going on well over twenty rather stressful hours since she had left the Menrva and she was definitely beginning to feel it. “Right now, or first thing in the morning?” she glanced over at Tela and Alena, “Besides finishing up our training session, do I have anything else scheduled for tomorrow?”

“I suspect both Councilor Anderson and Councilor Tevos will want to speak with you,” Vasir replied to her question, “and Dr. T’Rani would like to meet with you for about an hour. Otherwise than that it’s just picking up your armor and omni-tool before you leave.” She glanced over at her compatriot to see if she had anything to add.

“How much longer do you expect the training to run?” Alena questioned her.

Shepard frowned in thought as she thought about what she still needed to go over, “Maybe three or so hours more?” Once the next day roughly arranged, the three asari decided to teach her the very basics of the meditative technique tonight and then Sha’ira would follow up with more in-depth training first thing in the morning.

“The danger of zeukeso,” Sha’ira began, “is that you will absorb the memory imprint of another to the extent that it exerts an undue influence on your own memories and patterns of thinking. A young asari is expected to learn from the memories and experiences of others, but we also believe that it is critical that each maiden remain uniquely herself. That is the primary reason we encourage them to go out into the universe and take the time to explore. We want them to learn from its wonders and in the process learn about themselves and the person they want to become as a matron and matriarch.” Shepard nodded in understanding, she had learned that much from her Alliance xeno-cultural classes on the Asari. The Consort continued, “The meditative technique I will be teaching you is designed to help the maiden retain a strong sense of her core self while learning from a memory imprint.”

“The first step of the technique,” Sha’ira explained, “is to pick a core set of formative memories to meditate upon. These core memories should be of formative events in your life that have shaped the person you are today. To begin, it’s usually recommended that you to focus on a very strong memory from your early childhood. Explore that memory, determine what effect it had on the person you are today. It will become the first memory of a chain of memories that you will use to anchor your sense of self as you explore the memories of others like a ship anchoring at harbor to prevent the currents from either taking it back out to sea or grounding it upon the beach.”

Shepard nodded her understanding even as she was a bit concerned about what might come next. Her memories were so vivid and real these days. She had found out the hard way that if she were not on guard against it that it was almost as easy to get lost in them as in one of the Prothean memories. She knew that Drell had the same difficulty, but it was one thing to intellectually know it and another thing to realize that you had lost all sense of where you were in the present as you were lost in a memory of the past.

“In case you’re feeling self-conscious about this,” Tela commented to her, “all of us use this meditative technique regularly even as matrons, it helps keep us grounded as ourselves.”

Unexpectedly Alena added, “It’s important to remember that the intent of this isn’t to keep yourself from changing if the memory imprints contain wisdom for you. The intent is to make sure that you change as you would have if you had perhaps trained under them instead of their memory imprints overwhelming your own personality and beliefs. The difference is subtle perhaps, but it is also essential in understanding the meditation technique’s purpose.”
Shepard stared at the tall asari seated to her left in astonishment, this entire time the other Spectre had spent in flirtatious teasing and now out of the blue Alena offered a truly profound and useful point of view. “That’s…thank you, the memories have helped me quite a bit so it’s been odd to hear that they’re some type of threat to me,” she admitted, “though I understand about the cultural thing. While I admire Prothean culture in some ways, in other ways it’s not admirable at all - especially in how they viewed races that were not their own as being intrinsically lesser. Even when they permitted them to be part of the Empire once they completely adopted Prothean ways and call themselves Protheans, they were still second-class citizens compared to those who were born Prothean and kept from rising to the highest levels of the government and military.” Shepard sighed, “I know that’s the case for most of our governments,” she glanced around at the three asari matrons and noted they were simply listening to her and not disagreeing, “but I don’t want to think that way.”

“You truly mean that,” Vasir sounded contemplative as she shifted to one side in her seat, resting her elbow on the arm of her chair and then resting her cheek in her hand.

“I do,” Amanda met the asari’s deep brown eyes, “we may have centuries of experience between us, but you and I are effectively equally as young, equally as chosen to be worthy of existence, and equally as loved by Her. Who then am I to judge you as either greater or lesser? Who am I to place my personal judgment higher than Her own judgment? If I did so I would imply that I think my judgment is better…and I would never either think that or be that disrespectful of Her.” Fiona, Amanda’s mother had been a Reformed Catholic and she had originally been raised as such with a leavening of her father’s more deistic beliefs. One of the things she had been taught as a child was that Christ had warned Humanity not to presume to tell God how he should think or judge another person. Though she would not call herself either Catholic or Christian now, that admonition was at the core of her determination to be open-minded about others and to strive to only judge their actions and not their personhood or soul…though the Batarians made that very hard sometimes. Now…after her death, she was more certain than ever that she was correct in her beliefs. What She judged to be worthy of creating was worthy, and Amanda would not question Her judgment. Even when another person’s actions and decisions and her actions and decision led to them fighting one another and her killing them, she did not question their existential right to exist nor offer her opinion on the disposition of their souls.

“That’s an interesting way of thinking about it,” Vasir finally responded with a bemused expression.

Shepard glanced over at Sha’ira, the Consort had a small smile playing upon her lips. She already knew of Amanda’s spiritual beliefs for in the past they had discussed the differences between them and Asari Siari. Their eyes met and the Consort said, “You can prepare for learning the technique by considering what memories you want to comprise that core tonight, and then we can begin to create your memory chain tomorrow morning.” That made Shepard relax, she was too tired and too anxious over asking Sha’ira if she could get her in contact with Liara to really concentrate on this right now.

As it became apparent they were essentially done for the night, Tela straightened up in her chair and said, “Well, it’s time we took our leave, thank you for the pleasure of your time and hospitality Sha’ira.” She rose to her feet motioning for Alena to join her before turning to Shepard, “The Spectres Office has made arrangements for a hotel room for you tonight.”

“Or, you are welcome to remain here tonight,” Sha’ira immediately offered as M’Tara pushed herself up from her chair.

That was just what Amanda had hoped might happen. “I’ll remain here if it won’t cause any trouble?” she glanced inquiringly at the two asari Spectres.
Tela and Alena glanced at one another and then Vasir shrugged, “I don’t see why it would, it will certainly make it easier for you to get an early start tomorrow morning. We can come over around ten and then go over to the Tower together.”

Shepard took that to mean that she wasn’t really supposed to be wandering around on her own just yet. “Sounds good to me,” she agreed after glancing inquiringly over at the Sha’ira to see if that time worked for her as well.

Five minutes later, after the two asari Senior Spectres had left, Sha’ira turned toward her with an inquiring look, “What is troubling you?”

Over the rising anxiety that was twisting her inside Amanda gave the Consort a weak smile at her insight, “Can you get me in touch with Liara T’Soni?”
“Liara T’Soni?” Sha’ira questioned with a curious look, “I believe she is on Illium now working as an information broker, but surely you know this?”

Shepard frowned, an information broker? During their first conversation the Illusive Man had given her what she thought had been some song and dance about Liara now working for the Shadow Broker when she had asked about her former crew members. Had he actually told her the truth?

She pressed her lips together as she considered exactly what she should say, “Not exactly…things aren’t quite as simple as I suspect Spectre Vasir made them seem when she first contacted you.” One of Sha’ira’s brows rose as the elegantly attired nais in front of her regarded her with what she would normally describe as a ‘no shit’ expression - only more refined of course. Amanda sighed, how to keep this as simple and short as possible, “I’ve only been awake for twelve days and neither the Alliance or Council are responsible for the fact that I’m alive instead of dead right now. Cerberus was the one who recovered me and is responsible for my,” she waved her right hand toward the unhealed area on her cheek and finished, “reconstruction. As you can see, even after two years I’m still not quite fully healed.” That did startle Sha’ira, Shepard saw as the nais’s blue eyes widened with her surprise. “This is literally the first chance I’ve had to contact Liara away from everyone’s prying eyes and ears, and if I don’t take it now I don’t know when or if we will be on Illium any time soon,” she explained, trying to keep her tone from turning plaintive. “I’d really like for Liara to hear this directly from me, instead of from the news.”

Sha’ira stared at her searchingly for several seconds, as if trying to determine whether or not she was about to say that it was all a terrible joke. Shepard could see the exact moment when the matron realized that wasn’t going to happen, and her gaze turned inward as her expression grew thoughtful. Amanda could almost see her mind re-sorting through the facts she had been given and what she had heard during their little gathering, and putting them back together in a slightly different order. Finally the Consort spoke, “That explains why you…” her voice trailed off and she fell silent. The matron dipped her head and closed her eyes, then a few seconds later she let out an audible breath as her head rose and her eyes re-opened. “Spectre Vasir’s admonition is understandable now,” the nais stated quietly, then regaining her normal tone she inquired “I gather the Council has not yet released any information to the public about your reappearance?”

Shepard snorted in amusement tinged with a touch of bitter emotions, “You mean have they decided
what to say about it, or why they held a funeral for me two years ago? Or explained why Cerberus was able to get to me before either one of them?” She shook her head, “Not that they have told me at any rate.”

The matron’s eyes sharpened briefly at her statement then softened, “Ah, Amanda,” she sighed, “twelve days…” Sha’ira shook her head minutely, “Of course I will arrange for you to make your call, and you need have no concern over anyone listening in on you. Even on Illium, where they monitor nearly all of their communications traffic, they do not monitor communications from an avowed Consort. It is part of their agreement with the Republics.” Shepard thought Sha’ira was perhaps being a bit overconfident in that assertion, but there was a better chance that the Consort’s communications wouldn’t be monitored than her own. “I believe I know who to contact to get Liara T’Soni’s communications identity number on Illium,” Sha’ira continued, “it shouldn’t take me very long to find it. Did you want to remain here or visit with the acolytes in the residence hall? I’m sure they would be very pleased if you joined them.”

Amanda didn’t think she could keep track of a conversation at the moment, “Not right now? Maybe afterward?”

Sha’ira gracefully inclined her head, her expression understanding. She then turned and left, and within moments had disappeared among the garden’s greenery. Left alone with only her chaotically flitting thoughts for company, Shepard’s mind returned to her conversation with the Illusive Man that first day. Besides speaking of Liara, he had also told her that Garrus had left the Citadel and gone incognito for some unknown reason; Wrex had gone to Tuchanka and actually done what they talked about him doing, which was to unite all the Krogan clans; and Tali had returned to the Flotilla. She hadn’t known how much of it to believe, because it had mostly sounded to her like reasons why she could only really depend on Cerberus to help her bullshit. If at least the part about Wrex was true, Amanda was both pleased and touched that Wrex had decided to take up what she knew was a monumental task once again. The krogan Battlemaster had attempted it once before, but after his father, Jarrod, had betrayed him Wrex had left Tuchanka, disillusioned with his race and the way most would rather fight and kill than spend the time needed to rebuild their society. It was a decision she had repeatedly urged him to reconsider. After they had reclaimed his family armor from Tonn Actus, Wrex had agreed to think about it. Perhaps after her death he had actually decided to try once again, but she wouldn’t know for certain until she could independently verify it.

Despite the general bad blood between turians and krogan, Garrus, Wrex and she had become quite good friends over the course of their tracking down Saren. There had been a number of nights when she had snuck out with Garrus and Wrex and went drinking away from the rest of the crew. Amanda found she could let herself be more than just the Commander with them; she could just be a fellow warrior seeking a moment of relaxation away from the battlefield. They had never let on what happened those nights and she never heard any of what was said come back to her, just proving that she had been right about her choice of drinking buddies. She hadn’t been any less close to Tali; it was just that one didn’t take a young quarian barely out of her teens with you to drink with your buddies, nor did one take a sheltered young asari researcher for whom you had certain interests in and talk about the hell you raised several years earlier. After she and Liara became lovers, she had often chosen to spend time with her over going out and drinking with Wrex and Garrus. Something they had teased her about, but had certainly understood.

Concerning Garrus’s reported disappearance, Shepard didn’t know what to think about that. She had submitted his name as a possible Spectre candidate so that he was better positioned to help her against the Reapers. It made no sense that knowing what was coming he would turn his back on that and disappear, he was no coward. Besides, she certainly didn’t put it past the Cerberus leader to engage in a bit if misdirection or outright lying to make sure she didn’t go searching for the turian
when he didn't think Garrus should be on the team. She would have to keep an ear out, maybe she would hear something or maybe Garrus would search for her himself once he heard news of her reappearance.

Concerning what TIM had said about Liara being an information broker, before the maiden archaeologist had ever met Shepard or heard about the Reapers she had already figured out there was a 50,000-year extinction cycle, that the Protheans had been wiped out during the last one, and that the mass relays and Citadel were most likely not created by the Protheans, but by an even older race. She had discovered all of that by piecing together sparse fragments of information and seeing a complex whole that others could not. No, Shepard could see Liara excelling as an information broker, the only question in her mind was why the switch away from academia? And why with the Shadow Broker? Shepard couldn’t care less what the Illusive Man thought of that or whether it was a threat to him or not, but the information, if true, concerned her deeply. What had happened to Liara in the two years since her death?

“Amanda?” Sha’ira came into view upon the path causing the butterflies fluttering around in Shepard’s stomach to pick up the beat and start up a conga line dance. “I have Liara’s contact information and have already arranged for her to have access to the communications equipment in Nos Astra’s Temple of Athame, as that is the closest secure location to her home. They will contact me when she has arrived and everything is ready, which should be in approximately forty minutes.”

“Forty minutes?” Shepard repeated blankly, why was she going to the Temple of Athame?

“It is Illium, Amanda,” Sha’ira replied with a hint of amusement, “I could not guarantee the privacy of your communication without sending her to a location that I know is not being monitored.”

That…made a lot of sense actually. The warning briefings the Alliance gave for those taking leave on Illium included the tongue-in-cheek slogan ‘Big Sister IS Watching’ for a very good reason. Monitoring devices were ubiquitous on the planet, especially in public spaces. At least by law they couldn’t place visual monitoring devices in the public restrooms. Mind you the aforementioned law notably did not extend to a blanket prohibition of monitoring devices in public restrooms, just the assurance that there were no visual monitoring devices within them. “True,” Amanda acceded the point, “I'm sure both of us will be more comfortable knowing that our call is actually private. Thank you for arranging it,” she said sincerely.

The matron inclined her head in acceptance and then motioned toward the table as she went to pour herself some more tea, “Would you like another cup?”

Shepard altered her path so that she could serve herself then sat down in the seat she had been sitting in earlier. “I should probably explain things a bit more thoroughly,” Sha’ira hadn’t asked, but she had to be curious about what had happened to her.

“If you are comfortable speaking of it,” the Consort calmly responded and then delicately took a sip of the fragrant reddish tea.

Deciding that was a good idea, Shepard took a sip of her own as she took a moment to gather her thoughts, considering all that had happened over the past twelve days. It was hard to believe that less than two weeks had passed since she woke up to the sound of gunfire and fighting. She sighed and then reached up to remove the long blue hood of her asari styled Spectre uniform upon her head, carefully folding it and laying it upon the table before reaching up and rubbing her hand over her quarter inch of auburn hair.
What could she share with Sha’ira that didn’t touch on classified information and where exactly should she start? At the beginning seemed obvious, or at least the beginning she had just learned about from Anderson. She frowned pensively, did she really want to start there? She sighed, “Well I guess the place to start is with the attack on the Normandy by the Collectors and my death.”

Sha’ira was silent for a moment, then she commented in a carefully neutral tone, “We were told the Geth had attacked your ship.”

“The Council and Alliance did think that two years ago,” Shepard responded. “At the time of the attack, we couldn’t identify the ship that was attacking us. Only that it was a cruiser sized vessel that didn’t match any known ship profile. Then, almost half a year ago, the Alliance positively identified a Collector ship and they realized its profile matched that of the ship that attacked the Normandy.” In deference to Anderson, she didn’t mention that the Alliance had discovered this because the Collectors were behind the attack on Fehl Prime. Personally, she thought the Alliance needed to tell the truth soon or the news would end up coming out all on its own, and when that happened the public would be rightfully angered by the cover up.

The matron nodded thoughtfully and then followed up with the question, “Why do you believe that you died?”

“Because I was flung into space by an explosion after successfully managing to get my pilot, Jeff Moreau, into an escape pod. That was when I found out that my air supply had been damaged during the explosion.” She tried focusing on the cup of tea in her hand rather than what she was talking about in an effort not to remember it too well. “It didn’t take long for my air supply to run out.” The curve of a white planet with its sun rising above the horizon, gleaming brilliant upon the ice below filled her vision as she struggled to take a breath that would not come - she violently jerked her head - sucked in the deep breath that she hadn’t been able to a second before and shifted her gaze to some nearby flowers. Dammit, she thought as she rubbed suddenly sweating hands on her thighs. She thought she had mastered this after managing with Dr. T’Rani earlier in the day.

The scent of flowers, amber, and spiciness filled her nose and she turned her head to see Sha’ira standing next to her chair. She had been so caught up in the memory that she hadn’t even seen the matron rise and come over. Shepard drew in a breath of the familiar soothing scent, felt herself calm down then looked up to meet Sha’ira’s deeply concerned gaze. “I thought Alliance doctors were well versed in how to therapeutically treat memory triggers due to psychological trauma?” the Consort asked her, as she placed one blue hand gently upon her shoulder.

A flashback, Shepard realized, that’s what Sha’ira thought she had just witnessed. “They are,” she responded, “but my doctor is concerned about possible side effects with what Cerberus did to make sure my neural functions didn’t degrade.” A slight, puzzled crease formed between the asari’s brows, but before the Consort could inquire what she meant by that Shepard explained, “They saturated my neural tissues with synthetic drell neurochemicals to prevent neural degradation. It worked, only it came with some unexpected side effects such as making it much easier to recall my memories of the past as well as affecting how new memories are formed and stored.” She sighed, “From what I can tell my memory is drell-like now.”

A flash of surprise crossed Sha’ira’s face and Amanda knew she hadn’t expected that answer at all. Surprise faded into solemn, thoughtful intentness and then the Consort asked, “Do you think that is also responsible for the alteration of the information that was passed onto you from the beacon?”

Now it was Shepard’s turn to be surprised, “Yes,” she responded after a moment. It wasn’t quite the truth, but it was at least very close to the truth.
Deep blue eyes narrowed for a brief moment, and Shepard knew that somehow Sha’ira knew that wasn’t the entire truth. She couldn’t tell her the truth though, all she could do was give the nais a slightly apologetic, but resolute, look in return. The matron seemed to accept it as her next question returned to the topic of her new memories. “Do you often get caught up in your memories?”

“Not to that extent,” Shepard was able to answer this question honestly, “it happens more often if I’m tired or stressed.”

Sha’ira gave her a compassionate look and the nais’s hand on her shoulder rose, brushed against her cheek and then glided over the top of her head before the Consort returned to her own seat. It probably said something about her state of mind that Amanda found the brief touch as comforting as she did, she sighed, “I’m usually able to control it by focusing on something else or shifting my focus around, but unfortunately it didn’t work that time.”

“That is a drell technique,” Sha’ira informed her.

“It is?” Shepard said curiously, “I couldn’t find much out on how they deal with their memories. I did it once and it seemed to work, so I kept it up.” She looked at the asari hopefully, “Do you happen to know of any others?”

“Unfortunately no,” Sha’ira responded regretfully, “other than that one method I know very little else about how they prevent involuntary memory recalls. I will inquire,” she said, then paused and added, “discretely, about other techniques.”

“Involuntary memory recall,” Shepard mused, her tone a bit dry, “I think I’ll use that term rather than flashback.”

The nais’s dark blue eyes rested upon her thoughtfully, then she asked in a gently concerned tone. “How are you dealing with the change to your memories?”

Shepard didn’t know if she appreciated the insightful nature of the question or not, “I keep telling people it’s like having a greybox…but honestly from what I’ve heard about them it’s only superficially similar. While it’s nice that my memory has improved so much and I can easily recall even the smallest of details now, it’s just all so different than before,” she admitted uneasily. “For me everything was as it was just two weeks ago, and then I died, and then I wasn’t dead, and overnight everything has changed - my body, my memories. Two years have passed for everyone else,” she looked down at her hands wrapped around her tea cup, frowning deeply at her thoughts, “and I have to keep remaining myself of that fact even though the reminders of it are everywhere.” Amanda fell silent for a long moment as she realized she didn’t really want to go any further into this conversational topic at this time. “I don’t think greyboxes record emotions either,” she abruptly returned to the original topic of conversation, “that’s probably the most disconcerting thing about my memories now. It’s really like briefly stepping back in time and reliving the exact moment.”

“I can see how that would be very disconcerting,” Sha’ira responded after a brief moment and there was an undercurrent of sincerity to her tone that caused Shepard to lift her gaze from her teacup to the asari. The Consort’s blue eyes were intently fixed upon her and in them Amanda could see an echo of the sincerity with which the nais had spoken. It was then that Shepard realized that she didn’t know if Sha’ira’s response was only in reference to her memories or to the other…or maybe it was to both.

She nodded, “It is disconcerting,” Shepard agreed, slouching in her chair and frowning absentely at
the greenery around her. “More disconcerting maybe than even knowing that I died, probably because I try not to think of that very often, but I can’t really ignore my own memories that well.” She thought about it some more, “Or maybe equally…I don’t know. I don’t really know what to think of dying and now being alive.” She looked over at Sha’ira and said quite seriously, “It’s not supposed to happen.”

The Consort looked at her searchingly, “You speak as if you were clinically dead for an unusual amount of time.”

It was at that point that Amanda realized she had left out a few rather critical details. Sha’ira must be wondering why she was so bothered by the idea of dying and then being resuscitated. Though very rare, it was certainly not impossible for someone to die and then be brought back by timely medical intervention. “We were attacked above the planet of Alchera in the Terminus systems, it’s a very cold planet with very little atmosphere. The planets gravity well pulled in my body and since the atmosphere was so thin it didn’t burn up but survived to actually make planetfall. Then my body froze, and from what I know that’s where Cerberus found me, frozen, shattered from planetfall, and burned both by the explosion of the Normandy and from entering Alchera’s atmosphere. Bio-synthetics and implants were used to replace the parts of my body that were too damaged to be repaired.” She indicated the areas on her face where you could see said bio-synthetics, “As you can see even my helmet didn’t perfectly protect me, I think they had to entirely reconstruct my face and my eyes are both cybernetic implants now.” A memory of glowing orange in the darkness had Shepard shaking her head to drive it away.

“While I was frozen, Cerberus used an experimental technique borrowed from the Republics to increase my biotic abilities,” Shepard continued, “it’s why my aura is so strong. My biotics are now substantially more powerful as they were able to double the size of my eezo modules. As for how long they kept me literally on ice, I don’t know for certain, but I suspect they didn’t thaw me out and start my reconstruction for several months.” It was an amazingly brief recital of what she knew concerning her reconstruction, but then she hadn’t asked many questions about it outside of asking about her biotics and memory. The fact that she hadn’t yet pestered Miranda with questions most certainly said something about her current state of mind, mused Shepard. She was avoiding seeking out too much information about her reconstruction and finding an inordinate amount of comfort in the simplest touch from a friend. Both signs of just how much stress she was currently experiencing, which was of course why her skin graphs were healing so slowly.

Sha’ira sat back slightly in her chair and regarded her with a questioning look that held a subtle sense of confusion to it, as if she were having trouble accepting what Shepard had just told her.

Amanda was sympathetic, it had sounded unbelievable when she first heard it in Miranda’s voice logs on Lazarus Station…to some extent it still sounded unbelievable even now. She sighed, “I know how it sounds, it was hard for me to accept as the truth as well.” She paused thinking about it, then said reflectively, “The testing Dr. T’Rani did earlier today actually resolved a many of my lingering doubts. She was immediately able to recognize the method Cerberus used to increase the size of my eezo nodules as one originally developed by the Republics. One developed when they were researching whether or not it was possible to increase the size of eezo nodules in Asari similar to the way that a secondary exposure in puberty can increase the size of eezo nodules in salarians. The Republics abandoned the research when they couldn’t overcome the problem that the process would burn out the nervous system of a living person. It only worked on cadavers, where you could freeze them or use some other method to reduce or draw off the electrical fields caused by the mass effect fluctuations in the nodes from the procedure.” She finally said the word she had been thinking of ever since Dr. T’Rani had danced so carefully around it when speaking of the experiments. Cadavers. Dead bodies. She had really been dead, the thought sank in, making her feel rather
strange inside. Miranda hadn't been lying to her.

Sha’ira’s chair scraped harshly against the flagstones as the nais abruptly stood, and Amanda jerked her gaze over that way startled by the noise. The asari was staring at her with such a fierce expression that she was taken aback by it. “Do not refer to yourself in such a manner,” Sha’ira said forcefully.

“But…” Amanda started to half-heartedly argue only to fall silent upon seeing the sternness in the Consort’s deep blue eyes.

“I do not know if what you believe is true or not,” the Consort continued, “nor do I really care, the only thing I care about is do you still feel like yourself?”

Sha’ira honestly didn’t care that she had been dead? Amanda stared at the nais searchingly, but could see no sign of deception in the asari’s sternly fierce expression. The level of emotion that Sha’ira was openly showing surprised Amanda as the matron normally exuded an aura of gentle calmness. Over the months of their conversations while she was chasing Saren the two of them had built up a fairly high level of trust and the basis for a solid friendship. Sha’ira taking the step of granting her guest right in her home indicated that much was true. This display of emotion however, seemed to indicate that Sha’ira felt a bit more strongly toward her than Amanda had realized. “Well the tests Dr. T’Rani did proved I wasn’t a clone who had been led to believe she was Amanda Athene Shepard…so yes I accept that I am actually myself,” she finally responded to the asari’s question.

That got her an expression of surprise as Sha’ira brows rose, “That was a concern?”

“With Cerberus involved?” Shepard responded with a sigh as she recalled the moment when she realized how concerned she had been about the possibility, “I wouldn’t doubt they would try something like that if they thought it would work. So yes, in the back of my mind it was a concern of mine.”

The matron seemed to take a moment to process that, as her stern demeanor melted into compassion. “Oh Amanda,” the Consort sighed as she pulled her chair back into place and gracefully settled back into it. “It sounds like this has been an exceptionally long and difficult day for you and the previous twelve haven’t been very easy for you either.”

Shepard barked out a slightly bitter laugh at her statement. “Going on thirty hours now, but I did have an anesthesia induced nap earlier while Dr. T’Rani took the biopsy samples she needed for her DNA testing.”

Sha’ira looked slightly taken aback, though Amanda wasn’t certain if it were due to the number of hours she had been awake or the idea of them needing to put her under in order to take the needed biopsy samples to conclusively prove her identity. The Consort’s brow rose as she commented, “And in addition to requiring you to undergo invasive medical procedures and debriefing them, the Council also required you to train your fellow Spectres?”

Shepard snorted in amusement at the question, it did sound rather odd when phrased that way. “Yes,” she responded, “biotic techniques from the Prothean memories.”

That caused a fleeting look of intrigue to pass over Sha’ira’s elegant features, but she did not pursue it. “At least you have managed to get away from Cerberus and back to the Citadel to establish your identity with the Council. Now you can receive proper medical care and, if you are amenable to it, I
would be pleased to offer my services to you as a counselor.”

“Umm,” Amanda temporized, caught by surprise though perhaps she shouldn’t have been as well as she knew Sha’ira. What the Consort was offering was very generous, and probably the wisest course of action…in any other circumstance other than the one they were now facing. It was simply too critical for her to determine what if anything the Collectors had to do with the Reapers, and how much more time the galaxy had before the genocidal machines invaded. “That is very kind of you to offer,” Shepard said earnestly, wanting Sha’ira to know that she truly appreciated it. Then she drew in a breath and just dove into it, “However, I’ll be returning to my ship. The Council has agreed that the Collectors are potentially too much of a threat. They have agreed to let me continue to investigate them, and if possible stop their attacks.”

Sha’ira frowned at her, her sky-blue hued brows drawing together and a slight crease forming between them. “You are not even fully healed. How can they require you to go on a mission while you are still recovering?” The matron did not look at all pleased with her decision. It was startling to see, for the only other time Shepard had seen Sha’ira frown was on the day the Sovereign had attacked the Citadel. Even then it had only been for a very brief moment before being smoothed away before any of the others could see it.

“I know, I know,” Amanda responded after the moment it took to get over her surprise, “but this is too important to delay.” The matron’s displeased frown only deepened in response, and it dawned on Amanda that Sha’ira had dropped her consort persona and was letting her see the nais behind the guise of her profession. A profession which required the matron to act as if she were always calm and composed no matter what else was happening around her.

“Certainly you can spare two weeks to heal from your injuries,” Sha’ira persuasively argued with her. “And if your mission is that important, then it is equally important that you are physically and mentally at your best for it.”

Shepard had to acknowledge that the nais had a point, and actually considered her suggestion for a long moment before regretfully shaking her head. “Not at the pace things are moving. I need to spend time on the ship with my crew instead of sequestered from them, and since the Council has forbidden my crew from stepping foot on the Citadel…” Her voice trailed off and Shepard shrugged, “That means I need to keep on schedule and return to the ship sometime tomorrow.” Since the Council now knew about her ship, there was no point in taking the same circuitous route back. She could take a shuttle from the Citadel directly to New Canton, which would only take two or three hours at most. That meant she could now stay until tomorrow evening and still meet her return deadline.

From her expression Sha’ira was not at all swayed by her reasoning, and Shepard resigned herself to an extended discussion about the matter. She knew the matron was only concerned for her wellbeing, but with the high possibility that the Reapers were involved with the Collectors this mission had to come before everything else. Before Sha’ira could make another attempt at persuading her to remain on the Citadel however, the gentle chiming of her omni-tool claimed their attention.

Shepard stared at the golden bracelet which graced the Consort’s wrist, her thoughts completely thrown into disarray at the sound. “Is that…?” Two years, two years, two years, the thought drummed in her mind as her stomach gleefully renewed its churning.

Sha’ira stared at her slim golden omni-tool for a moment as well before gracefully lifting one blue hand to lightly tap a finger upon its surface and read the incoming message. “Yes, Liara has arrived
at the temple and the priestesses are ready to initiate the encrypted communications channel with us.” Her deep blue eyes met Amanda’s silver ones, “If you will follow me, I will take you to our communications room.” Sha’ira did not immediately rise and leave however, but in a rare display of what seemed to be indecisiveness appeared to be on the verge of saying something else. After a moment though the matron evidently decided against it, for the nais rose from her chair without speaking, turned and headed down the path out of the garden.

That was odd, thought Amanda as she stared after the asari, and not at all confidence inspiring. Her stomach flipped unsettlingly as she rose and set off after the sky-blue nais. Maybe Sha’ira thought she should have waited until she could talk with Liara in person Shepard mused? If she waited though, certainly the maiden would learn about her re-appearance and then would wonder why she wasn’t making an effort to contact her. Then all this self-doubt, worry and wondering if they were still anything together or not would be inflicted upon them both instead of just herself. No, Amanda resolutely shook her head as she followed Sha’ira out of the garden and deeper into the complex. Better for them to talk as soon as possible, she drew in an uneven breath as a chill pricked across her skin, even if the outcome was not the one she desired so badly.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The Mass Effect universe is the property of Bioware/Electronic Arts. No infringement of these copyrights is intended as this is a not for profit fan fiction work.

Rewrite Notes: Still inspired by the Beyonce song “Save the Hero,” from the album I am…Sasha Fierce.

Author’s Notes: I’ve always liked how PMC65 portrayed Asari culture, this chapter takes a lot of inspiration from her works especially the part where younger Asari learn directly from their mothers or other elder family members how to deal with emotional loss.

Revision History: 10/03/2018

Amanda followed the Consort into the compound’s sound-proofed communications room which contained a high-tech holographic generator inset into the middle of the dark-grey tiled floor as well as a large high-resolution display screen centered on the far-side wall. Shepard’s gaze slipped immediately past the inactive holographic generator to the image currently displayed upon that screen. An image which showed two asari standing within a room very similar to this one. One of the two asari was a matriarch in silvery white and deep blue ceremonial robes - the other asari was Liara. Suddenly Amanda was very happy that they weren’t using the holographic communications system with its relatively poor resolution. Otherwise she wouldn’t be able to so clearly see her lovers deep blue eyes widen at the sight of her or reacquaint herself with the purple hued dusting of freckling along the maiden’s cheeks.

“Salaa, High Priestess Lyta, Maiden Liara T’Soni,” Sha’ira greeted the two nais with a respectful bow of her head.

“Salaa, Consort Sha’ira,” both asari returned her greeting along with bow of their heads in return.

Belatedly, Amanda followed suit. “Salaa, High Priestess Lyta,” she dipped her head in polite respect to the matriarch.

The matriarch turned her attention to her, studying her intently for a long moment before returning the greeting, “Salaa, Spectre Amanda Shepard.”

Amanda suspected that she needed to get used to such reactions to her reappearance. Or… considering how she currently looked, maybe it was her appearance along with her reappearance. Her gaze slid from the older nai to focus solely on the younger one standing beside her. There were more important things to consider right now than the matriarch’s reaction. In a softer, warmer tone she greeted the maiden, “Salaa, Liara.”

Liara didn’t immediately return the greeting, and even more concerning it seemed to cause a slight frown to contract the maiden’s brow. “Salaa, Amanda Shepard,” Liara finally responded in a

Part 1: Chapter 21::12 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 9
Shepard exhaled a sharp breath at the maiden’s response, a band constricting across her chest. Her full name and the tone? What did that mean if anything? Did it mean that Liara was trying to tell her she did not feel the same as she had two years ago? Or maybe the maiden wasn’t certain it was actually her? Or, she thought self-consciously of the visible unhealed areas on her face, perhaps she should have waited a bit longer until she looked more like she used to? No sooner had that thought arisen in her mind than exasperation at herself followed it, she didn’t actually think Liara would be that hung up on her looks. She had probably just broken some important protocol by not using Liara’s full name in this more traditional setting. The questions and thoughts ran quickly - perhaps even somewhat frantically - through her mind, but she was saved from trying to figure out whether she needed to apologize by Sha’ira deftly taking over the conversation.

“Maiden Liara T’Soni,” the Consort said in a formal tone, “the Citadel Council has verified the authenticity of Amanda Athene Shepard’s identity and reinstated her status as a Spectre Agent of the Citadel Council. They did this only after extensive medical testing to confirm her identity.” Maybe that had been it then, Amanda thought with growing hope as she gazed at the maiden standing beside the priestess. Maybe Liara wasn’t yet certain of her identity. “And though the details of how she came to be among us again may sound unbelievable,” Sha’ira continued, “compelling physical evidence from her medical examination and scans indicate that it is the truth. I will leave that for her to relate to you, but I wanted to reassure you that these facts were vouched to me by two other Council Spectres.”

The Consort paused for a moment, then turned her head, her blue eyes directly meeting Amanda’s light grey ones. “I will also assure you personally,” Sha’ira declared, “as an avowed Consort, that I also declare that the human standing next to me is indeed Amanda Athene Shepard.” The nais turned away again, returning her attention to the display screen, and leaving Amanda wondering if the matron’s statement had only been intended for Liara or for the both of them. “Though her aura has changed due to her experiences, it is still recognizably that of the human I knew two years ago.”

Sha’ira paused for a brief moment before continuing on a slightly different topic, “As this communication is sealed under my authorization, I will ask that you both of you honor that, and avoid discussing anything not directly related to the purpose of this meeting. Which is for each of you to discuss what has happened in your lives since the destruction of the Normandy, and determine where things stand between you now.” The Consort glanced back and forth between them, “Do you both understand?” Upon receiving their affirmation, she continued, “And will both of you vow to abide by that limitation?”

Amanda turned her attention to Sha’ira, “I will,” she assured the matron, “I will not abuse your trust or hospitality in this, I will keep to the topic and limitations you placed on the conversation.”

“I vow to abide by your restriction as well Consort Sha’ira,” Liara said immediately after she finished, “and will not abuse the trust you are showing us by allowing us to have a private meeting instead of remaining to monitor us.”

So that was why the Republics allowed Consorts to authorize privileged communications, Shepard thought to herself. Such were reserved in the Systems Alliance for clergy, doctors, mental health professionals, and lawyers when they were speaking directly to their clients and could personally vouch for the contents of the communication. Consorts seemed to be counted as mental health professionals in the Republics, and Liara’s statement implied that the Consort who authorized such communications usually remained in attendance to ensure that the conversation stayed within the bounds of what was permissible. The Consort was probably stepping at the edge of her bounds of authority in letting them have a private conversation only because the nais knew Shepard and Liara
was a T'Soni.

“Then we will leave you two alone so that you can talk freely,” Sha’ira responded, “this communications line will remain open for the next thirty Galactic Standard minutes. At that point, if there is a need for your conversation to continue I will need to re-authorize the line to extend the time.” The Consort then inclined her head to the matriarch who returned the gesture with one of her own. On Illium, the High Priestess promptly turned and exited the room, closing the door behind herself. On the Citadel however, Sha’ira paused beside Amanda just long enough to inform her, “I will be waiting outside if you need anything,” before leaving the room and closing the door behind her.

Once they were completely alone, Liara reached forward toward her image - reached out toward her - and Amanda did the same, reaching out toward the maiden. They couldn’t actually touch but the maiden’s welcoming response flowed over Amanda, snapping the band of tension around her chest and almost making her feel lightheaded in her sudden relief. Despite her fears and concerns everything was going to be alright after all. Either Sha’ira’s assurance had settled Liara’s doubts about whether or not it was actually her, or maybe she really shouldn’t have been so informal in her greeting to Liara in front of a High Priestess of Athame and Sha’ira in her official role as a Consort. Sometimes she forgot when it came to the maiden that the nais belonged to one of the most preeminent and influential of the Asari noble Lineages. She was smiling in happiness when she noticed the maiden murmur something, something too soft for the microphone on the other side to pick up, and then the light blue nais’s outstretched arm dropped to her side. Liara’s head shook from side to side ever so slightly, and her expression shifted from welcoming to withdrawn in one terrible instant.

Amanda stilled, her smile dropping away as Liara’s posture shifted into one of clear withdrawal and the maiden pointedly turned her head to the side to look away from her. The feeling that filled Amanda then was as if an ice-cold bucket of water had been poured over her or someone had shot her, leaving her standing confused as she looked down in disbelief at the gaping hole in her chest. No, no, no, this couldn’t be happening, not after that welcome, not after it having been as if it was all going to be alright. Amanda dropped her hands to her sides, uncertainty and despair filling her, what had just happened? Liara turned away, leaving her staring sightlessly at the image of the light-blue sound-absorbing tiles that covered the walls of the room the maiden was standing within, and trying to do anything other than show how distressed she felt at this moment. Shepard clenched her hands, driving her nails painfully into the skin her palms as she forcefully reminded herself of her vow not to make a scene if everything went wrong, and it was looking like things were wrong.

Thuia. Nethuia. Arthuia. Tiria, dan avo dortha. (Breathe. Inhale. Exhale. Focus, but do not dwell.) Lindariel’s voice whispered in her mind, the elder prothean’s presence rising within her consciousness and exerting a calming influence. ‘Focus but do not dwell,’ her mind fastened on the words. They were almost the same ones used during N training to teach them how to deal with psychologically stressful combat situations. Focus only on what needed to be done to survive and complete the mission. Emotions should be acknowledged, but absolutely not be dwelled upon until you could work through them with a mental health professional. She didn’t really want to treat this like a combat mission though…

“My sources said you were alive.” Shepard shifted her attention back to the maiden as the nais spoke to her. Liara had at least turned back toward her and was looking at her. Amanda made herself breath in a regular pattern - to act like something approaching normal. “But I wasn’t certain they could be believed…” the sky blue nais stared at her, “It’s very good to see you.”

Liara’s voice was warm and sincere, and it confused the hell out of Amanda after what had seemed like a clear rejection. One thing Shepard’s mind did grab onto though as hope resurrected itself. The
Illusive Man and Sha’ira were correct, Liara was indeed an information broker and she had already known about her reappearance. What other information was the maiden aware of besides that Shepard wondered? More importantly - what accurate conclusions and what inaccurate conclusions - had Liara drawn from that information?

“I’m sorry,” Amanda temporized with an apology as she figured out how to say what she wanted to say next. “It wasn’t until now that I could contact you without…” she briefly hesitated because she really wasn’t sure how Liara would react, “without Cerberus listening in. They’re the ones who found my body on Alchera,” she drew in an unsteady breath not at all certain how this was being taken, “brought me back to life. Liara, I haven’t been with Cerberus all this time,” she paused as she realized that wasn’t really true, “or rather I haven’t been conscious and willingly with Cerberus all this time. I only woke up from the coma they kept me in while they repaired my injuries twelve days ago. I wouldn’t have… I wouldn’t have done that… I would have never deceived you into thinking I was dead and just disappeared for two years, and I would have never willingly joined with Cerberus.”

Liara looked distressed, “Shepard stop,” she protested, “I already knew all of that. I knew that you hadn’t just disappeared… That you died.” The maiden’s voice broke on the words in a way that sliced into Amanda’s heart upon hearing it. The asari drew in a deep breath, seemed to recover her composure. “Hasn’t anyone told you it wasn’t Cerberus, but the Blue Suns who discovered your body?” Liara asked and then continued, “That they took it to Omega to sell to the Collectors. And that Cerberus found out about the planned transaction, attacked the Blue Suns and took your body away from them before the Collectors arrived to claim it?”

Amanda was silent, her mind absorbing the new information and the startling fact that Liara was in possession of it as well as the fact that neither Miranda or Jacob had filled her in about it first. “No, I actually didn’t know about any of that,” Shepard quietly responded after a moment. "So, it was the Blue Suns that found me on Alchera…” Due to the fact that her body was still there to be found since neither the Alliance or Council had bothered to mount a recovery effort, her mind bitterly whispered.

“Yes,” Liara confirmed and then didn’t say anything else.

The succinct answer left what seemed like a rapidly growing chasm of silence to Amanda, leaving her struggling with what to say to fill it. Finally, a reasonable sounding response came to mind, “So you’re an information broker now?” Yes, she was fishing for information, but she didn’t know what to think of the way Liara was acting. The initial seeming rejection, and now this apparent concern for her. She didn’t know what it meant for them. She needed some clue, some idea, of what in the hell was going on with the maiden. In any case, this was talking about what had happened in the past two years, so it was one of the permitted topics.

Liara turned suddenly, pivoting on one foot and walking away from the camera. “Ever since I helped you stop Saren,” the maiden responded with her back still towards Shepard, “people have wanted to be my friend.” Amanda winced, she could guess what that actually meant. Liara glanced back at her over her shoulder, “Or at least not be my enemy. I’ve been able to set up a respectable business as an information broker. I’ve made a good living at it since you…” her voice trailed off and she turned away again with a sharp shrug of her shoulders, “well…for the last two years.”

Amanda frowned, Liara knew the Reapers were real…why had she decided becoming an information broker was the right thing to do? How did that make any sense at all with what was coming? Why not use some of the newfound influence she was talking about to get herself assigned as a Prothean researcher on Ilos? Focus her considerable intelligence on the task of getting the VI they encountered there up and running again so there was some proof of the existence of the
Reapers. Maybe that really was a dead end and the information simply wasn’t recoverable? Perhaps Liara had felt that becoming an information broker was a better way of looking for evidence of the Reapers? Amanda knew her mind was scrambling to find a reasonable reason, but this was Liara… there had to be a reason for this choice.

There was a long moment silence, then Liara turned, heading back toward the camera once again while looking at her. “And now you’re back,” the maiden continued, “preparing to take on the Collectors with Cerberus.”

Shepard froze, how much did Liara know or suspect? Had Liara withdrawn from her because she was apparently working with Cerberus instead of immediately going back to the Alliance? She couldn’t mention the truth, that she was only working with them to stop them, but she could clear up this misconception. “I wouldn’t if I had any other choice Liara,” she defended her decision. “Even though the Alliance and the Council publicly claim pirates are behind the abductions, they know that the Collectors are actually responsible for them. The Alliance is putting in GARDIAN towers, but that won’t be enough to stop the Collectors - especially if they have access to Reaper technology. They’ve already abducted over a million colonists already…”

“I understand,” Liara broke in before she could say anything more, “I wish you didn’t have to work with them, but I understand why you are. You are right, the Collectors must be stopped even if you have to work with Cerberus to stop them. Whatever they want with so many humans, it can’t be anything good.” The asari’s words were both a relief… and not a relief. They meant that Liara hadn’t withdrawn from her because she was working with Cerberus. “I understand your building a team.” Liara continued in what sounded like a really odd segue to Amanda, “If you need any information to help you find people just let me know.”

Amanda stared at the maiden, she felt totally at sea here with no clue as to why Liara had acted the way she had at the beginning of their conversation. She drew in a careful breath, a frown creasing her brow, “I’m not sure this is on topic for what we are supposed to be speaking about?” Liara frowned as well, a slightly consternated expression crossing her face. “Unless,” Amanda hesitantly offered, “if you were volunteering to work with us?” It had been two years for Liara, she reminded herself. Maybe the maiden just wanted to take things slow, take the time to properly reacquaint themselves with one another. “I could certainly use your help,” Amanda scowled, “so far Cerberus hasn’t impressed me with their intelligence gathering abilities.” If Liara did want to take things slow that was alright with her, Amanda thought, hope tentatively rising that this was what was actually going on. Given the time that had passed since she died, it made sense that they not just jump right back into the relationship. Also, on a more pragmatic note, having another means of obtaining intelligence would certainly be welcome, especially since Cerberus could not seem to get together a well-researched mission brief.

Liara let out a breath that sounded a bit like a laugh, but she shook her head. “I can’t Shepard, I’m sorry. I have commitments here, things I need to take care of.” The maiden’s tone was firm, but also carried a pleading undertone, as if asking for Amanda to understand that whatever it was, it was very important to her.

Amanda frowned, what could be more important to Liara than stopping the Reapers? Or maybe the maiden had her own line of inquiry going? Maybe that was why she was working with the Shadow Broker. “What’s happened during the past two years? What kind of things do you need to take care of? Are you in trouble?” she added the last in concern. Still though, she couldn’t help but notice that Liara hadn’t once called her Amanda during this entire time. The thought was upsetting, crushing the tentative hope that had been rising within her and threatening to overturn the tenuous hold she had on her emotions.
“No,” Liara responded as she shook her head, seemingly not noticing Amanda’s emotional distress, or at least not responding to it. “No trouble,” she began pacing slowly back and forth, “but it’s been a long two years. I had things to do while you were gone,” she bowed her head, “I have debts to repay.”

Sharp concern tamped down all other emotions, “Debts? To the Shadow Broker?” The Shadow Broker wasn’t known for his or her forbearance. Amanda frowned, had Liara promised more than she was actually able to deliver in return for information?

Liara’s head whipped her way, and the maiden frowned at her. “The Shadow Broker? No, why would think such a thing?” Before Amanda could respond the maiden continued, “I am not working for the Shadow Broker, but against him. We crossed paths not long after you died,” Liara explained to her. “I was on a job with a friend,” the maiden continued and Amanda noticed her blue hands clenching at her sides as she said this, “the Shadow Broker’s people caught us. My friend sacrificed himself so that I could escape. He was captured and I don’t know if he’s dead or alive and still being interrogated,” Liara turned toward the back of the room and took a few paces, “but I need to find him. I owe him my life.” She pivoted toward Shepard her expression clearly showing the anger the human could hear in her voice, “And I need to make the Shadow Broker pay for what he did.”

Was this it then? Blood seemed to rush to her head and all Amanda could hear for a second was the pounding of her own heart as she took in the level of anger - no, more than just anger, fury - that the maiden was displaying. It was fairly obvious from her demeanor and tone that Liara planned on making the Shadow Broker ‘pay for what he did’ by killing him and perhaps not quickly. Was this why Liara was keeping her at a distance by calling her Shepard? Was this friend more than a friend? It had been two years, never had she really felt that more than now. Believing her dead, had Liara fallen in love with someone else?

“You can’t work with us because you’re after the Shadow Broker? What if I help you find him,” she heard herself offer because that’s what friends did for friends right? This is how you acted when you weren’t trying to make a scene right? When you were trying to hide how your own heart was breaking as your lover held you at arms distance. Liara knew how few people related to her as Amanda instead of just Shepard, that the maiden had been - but apparently no longer wanted to be, her mind whispered - one of them.

“I’m sorry Shepard,” Amanda heard feeling numb, Liara wasn’t even interested in her help? “The galaxy doesn’t work that way, I need to find leads, trace information, I need to work. I can’t do that on the new Normandy. I wish I could.”

Several different emotions, thoughts and reactions hit Amanda at once - and the rising anger at the inherent condescension in Liara’s reply won. The galaxy didn’t work that way? As if she wasn’t aware of how the galaxy worked? “I wasn’t actually expecting you leave Illium T’Soni,” Shepard replied with a touch of coolness to her tone. “Cerberus monitors every piece of information that goes in and out of the ship. It would be relatively easy for them to feed you false information, guarantee that the results you gave me corresponded with their own. Even with you staying on Illium we would need to figure out how I could get timely reports from you that I could trust they hadn’t altered.”

Liara’s face went blank at when finally registered that Amanda had referred to the nais by her last name only…exactly as the maiden was doing to her. Human and asari stared at one another silently for a moment, the maiden looking stunned at this turn of the conversation. “The friend you lost, he was your lover?” Amanda rode the slight swell of anger long enough to ask before it ebbed entirely away, leaving her stranded as she waited upon the answer.
“What?!” Confusingly, Liara looked completely bewildered by the question, then deeply hurt. “No!” the maiden stared at her as if she had betrayed the nais even by asking it.

Amanda frowned in her own bewildered confusion. She had been so sure that was it, that was the reason for the distance Liara was keeping between them. “Why then?” finally she let her hurt show in her voice, “You’re calling me Shepard to keep me at a distance,” she called the asari on her behavior. “What are we? Are we even a we anymore?” she asked plaintively, wasn’t this what they were supposed to be discussing?

When Liara looked stricken, but didn’t reply. Amanda physically pulled back from the maiden, dipping her head and crossing her arms defensively over her chest. It was pretty clear to her that their relationship was over, but she still had no idea why it was over. Feeling defeated she inquired, “Should I even look for you on Illium?”

“What?” Now Liara looked alarmed, apparently, she hadn’t expected this type of reaction. “Yes, of course you should, why would you think that I wouldn’t want you to?”

Amanda stared at the nais in bewildered disbelief, ‘because of the way your acting toward me?’ she wanted to say to the maiden. She didn’t say that however, instead she said, “I don’t understand then, did you want to take things slow? Get to know one another again?”

“No,” the immediate reply seemed almost physically torn from the maiden.

There was an undercurrent of fear in the nais’s tone that was impossible to miss, and Amanda found herself at a complete loss upon hearing it. “Why?” she paused to take a steadying breath, “Why are you so afraid? Why does the thought of us…?”? She stared beseechingly at the maiden and Liara stared back at her… Liara looked…terrified to be honest, as if she were staring into an abyss.

“I can’t,” Liara finally whispered in reply, clenching her hands together in front of her. “You’re going after the Collectors and then if you survive the Reapers.”

Abruptly things began to fall into place for Amanda. Liara had developed PTSD like symptoms following Matriarch Benezia’s death. No one had realized during the rush to Ilos and then the Battle of the Citadel following, but afterward things had slowed down enough for the maidens marked change in demeanor and abrupt loss of weight to become noticeable. She and Dr. Chakwas had been concerned enough to reach out to Councilor Tevos’s office for assistance seeking the name of a suitable therapist.

Instead of a name however, Councilor Tevos’s office had contacted her to schedule a confidential communication with Matriarch Ashita T’Soni, the venerable and extremely influential Potenia of the T’Soni Lineage. During that relatively brief conversation, the ancient Matriarch had succinctly explained to her that since this was the first personal loss that Liara had ever experienced, the maiden needed the family Matriarchs to guide the nais through the cognitive behavioral therapy methods the Asari had developed over the course of their history to help them deal with bereavement. The matriarchs Liara chose as guides would share with the maiden their own experiences with loss and help her process the emotions the nais was currently feeling in a healthy manner instead of letting them leave her traumatized and emotionally scarred. What Matriarch Ashita T’Soni had said made a lot of sense to Amanda. Her grandmother had done much the same to help her after losing her mother and father, only without the immediacy of a meld to help. Since the original Normandy had been in dry dock to repair some minor battle damage, Amanda had pressed for Liara to take advantage of the downtime to return to Thessia and visit with her family as they had requested. Two weeks later the maiden had returned, looking much healthier and at more peace with what had happened than before she had left.
Apparently, her death a month later had undone much of that progress, Amanda thought with dismay as she took in how distraught Liara looked at this moment. “Your family?” Amanda asked, confusion and a bit of anger at their apparent neglect rising in her, “Why weren’t they able to help you?” Liara’s deep blue eyes noticeably widened at her question and at that moment Amanda could only think that the maiden looked incredibly guilty - but why? They stared at one another in silence, the nais looking almost frozen in place. ‘How did she know about the Blue Suns and Cerberus?’ the question ghosted through her mind, thankfully in her own voice instead of someone else’s.

“Did you go to them?” Amanda asked the maiden, trying to understand why Liara was acting this way. Again, there was only silence in reply. Liara seemed to hardly even breathe on the other side of the camera. “Why didn’t you go to them for help?” Still the maiden didn’t reply to her, and finally she asked the question running thorough her mind. “Liara, how did you know that the Blue Suns had my body, that the Collectors wanted to buy it and that Cerberus intervened and ended up with it?” That elicited a response as the maiden noticeably flinched at the question.

Amanda was now certain that she was right, “You were there weren’t you?” Her mind continued putting things together, “Was this when you were almost captured by the Shadow Broker?” In response Liara closed her eyes and dipped her head. Why she wanted to ask, why had Liara turned her body over to Cerberus? Instead she asked…no, more demanded, “What happened? What exactly happened?”

The maiden drew in a shuddering breath as she opened her eyes, they flicked up briefly to meet Amanda’s then fell to the floor. “As I told you, the Blue Suns first found your body. What I didn’t mention was that they were in the pay of the Shadow Broker who wanted to sell you to the Collectors. I believe the Shadow Broker sold the Normandy’s location to them. That’s how they were able to track the ship and attack us. Feron, the friend I spoke of, sent me the information that your body had been recovered and informed me of Blue Suns plans. I went to Omega and met with him, then the Blue Suns ambushed us demanding to know why we were there. They might have killed us then except for Cerberus’s interference, allowing us to escape. Miranda Lawson lead the Cerberus team. She was the one who made the offer to me. If I gave them your body, they would do their best to bring you back to life. We were unable to stop the Blue Suns from handing off your body to the Shadow Brokers forces on Omega, so Feron and I infiltrated the Broker’s ship. We managed to get your body, but Feron had to stay behind in order for me to escape with you.”

Amanda really felt like sitting down at the moment, but unfortunately there were no chairs in the room. It was quite a bit to take in at once, and she had to wonder how much of this the Alliance and Council knew already but had kept to themselves. She wouldn’t be surprised to find out they knew everything, and she was the last person to find out what had actually happened to her. Amanda felt her biotics ripple as they responded to the surge of anger that rushed through her body, everyone - Cerberus, the Council - all seemed intent on keeping her in the dark.

“I’m sorry,” Liara blurted out, “I know how much Cerberus’s operations disgusted you, but they were the only ones offering a way to bring you back instead of just burying you. And I couldn’t…” the maiden seemed on the verge of outright sobbing, “I couldn’t take the long view, I couldn’t just cherish the short time we had together, I wanted…needed more.”

Amanda realized how the nais had taken her biotic outburst, “No, Liara,” she reassured the maiden, “I’m not angry with you.” After she said it Amanda realized it was actually the truth. She felt tired, drained, deeply saddened and still confused as hell - but not angry with Liara or with the choice she had made. It was an effort to even shrug her shoulders as she quietly asked, “So what happened between then and now. After everything you did just on the slim chance that Cerberus might succeed, why won’t you give us another chance to be together now that they did?”
Liara stared at her, blue eyes frightened and pained, “I hoped that Cerberus could do as they promised, but the months passed and being without you hurt so much.” Shepard clenched her hands, wishing now that she was actually on Illium, that she could go to Liara, hold her and soothe away the raw pain she was seeing. Liara drew in a harsh sounding breath, “Eventually as the months passed I stopped hoping, and sometime after that I stopped hurting every moment of every day.” The asari bowed her head for a moment before lifting it and continuing, “I managed to build up my business, focus on finding the Shadow Broker.” She lifted her hands and gestured towards the camera, repeating what she had said earlier, “And now after two years here you are, and you’re going after the Collectors and if you survive that mission the Reapers.” The maiden’s face contorted with pain, “I can’t Amanda, please understand, I just can’t do it again.” Tears welled, “If I let myself…and you died…I can’t, not again. Not when it’s stopped hurting so much and I was finally... Please, just don’t,” the last was a broken whisper.

Amanda held out her hand, wished so badly she could go to Liara, hold her and promise her that she wouldn’t die again. But they both knew that would be an empty promise. “I’m sorry, Liara I never meant...” what could she say; she never meant to break Liara’s heart? But yet she had, the proof of it was right in front of her. “I’m sorry,” Amanda repeated helplessly, there seemed to be little else she could say for she was going after the Collectors and then after that if she survived the Reapers. Liara would be faced with the fear of her death on pretty much a daily basis. Yes, people could and did die every day from everyday things like traffic accidents, but only in certain professions was that more than just a daily abstract possibility. You said I love you and be careful, kissed them and then really did not expect them to die. First responders and military personnel like herself though, their loved ones said I love you, kissed you goodbye and then had to deal with the very real fear that you might not return. To say otherwise would be to trivialize and dismiss the ongoing emotional toll on them, and some people discovered that they simply could not do it. Thus, the high rates of breakups and divorce in those professions... The stray thought went through Amanda’s mind that had never really thought that class at the beginning of their N training would apply directly to her before this moment. At least it helped her understand what Liara was going through, and why she was making the decision to not even try again. If Liara felt she simply couldn’t...

Amanda closed her eyes for a long moment, struggling with her own conflicted emotions. She did not want to deal with her own grief at the ending of their relationship right now. She would do that after this call had ended... Finally, on a slow inhaled breath, she opened them again and looked up at Liara. The two of them stared at one another, neither one saying anything to the other now that everything was out in the open between them. This won’t do, thought Amanda as she squared her shoulders and fell into an at ease stance, using the familiarity and formality of it help hold her emotions at bay. “Alright,” she broke the silence between them, “I’m not sure when or even if I’ll be by Illium,” she informed Liara, “but if we do, then I’ll try and contact you so that we can meet somewhere.”

Liara looked a bit taken aback by her demeanor, but then the maiden straightened up herself and nodded back. “I would greatly appreciate that Shepard…” she stopped, shook her head, and corrected herself, “Amanda, I do want to see you again.”

The sound of the maiden finally saying her first name made her emotions dangerously rise, and Amanda had to breath in a steadying breath to force them down again before she could manage to respond. “I will,” she assured the maiden. She paused uncertain about what she wanted to say next, but then decided to bite the bullet and just say it. “Liara, I suspect you didn’t go to your family because you didn’t want them to know about you handing me over to Cerberus. But I’m back now, and I’m sure Matriarch Ashita T’Soni either knows or will know about it soon. Go to her, there’s no reason for you to not to go now.” Liara gave her a look that said she didn’t exactly appreciate Amanda even making the suggestion, and Amanda let it drop. Either Liara would or wouldn’t, she couldn’t make the maiden.
She glanced over at the clock, checking the time, they only had a few minutes left in their allotment. Sadly, she felt only relief at that, the dam holding back her emotions felt like it was going to fracture and break at any time and she didn’t want Liara to witness it. She returned her attention to the maiden, “Provided Councilor Tevos get permission from the League for us to enter their space without being arrested as Cerberus agents, we should be headed to Omega next. After that who knows, but hopefully I’ll be able to visit Illium soon.” She paused and then added, “In the meantime, take care of yourself Liara and stay safe, the Shadow Broker is a dangerous enemy.”

Liara stared at her for a moment then quietly replied, “I know and I will, keep yourself safe as well Amanda.” On her end, the maiden nodded to her rather gravely, then walked over to the console and entered in some commands. In the next moment the display screen went dark indicating that the connection had been closed from the other end. Amanda stared at the screen in blank surprise for a moment, she hadn’t realized that was what Liara was doing at the console. She let out a shaky breath, then aware that the camera in the room was still active crossed over to the console shut down the transmission from this end as well.

As soon as the blinking light underneath the camera dimmed, indicating that it was turned off, Amanda backed up against the nearest wall and slid down it to sit on the floor. She pulled her knees up then rested her forehead against them. She was tired beyond belief, stressed and strung out feeling, and heartbroken. She let out a snorting, bitter sounding bark of a laugh, at least now she knew exactly how she had ended up in Cerberus’s hands. Liara had handed her body over because she wasn’t ready to let her go…only for two years later to not be able to take her back.

She sighed a long-exhausted breath, she had been relatively fine before, but now the thirty hours she had been awake seemed to all be piling on her at once. It might have honestly been easier she mused, if Liara had moved onto someone else in the past two years rather than this… But apparently Liara hadn’t dealt well with her death at all. Amanda hoped, really hoped that Liara had listened to her about going home to talk to her family even if the nais hadn’t liked the suggestion. She wished she could take her own suggestion, visit Earth, spend a few weeks in Greece with her relatives. She would walk along the seaside cliffs next to the Mediterranean Sea, pause and lift her face to the sun while feeling the ocean breeze cooling her body and listen to the waves crash upon the rocks below. Afterward, she would visit the sacred grotto with the statue of the Goddess Athene. Once the sun set, she would join the gathering of her relatives at the Kanellis ancestral home, currently owned by her great-aunt Medea Athene Kanellis Theallis, a retired Hellenic Coast Guard officer. She would talk with the matriarchs of her own family about the difficulties she currently faced and listen to their wisdom gained from dealing with similar situations. Many of them had served either in the military, police or other public service positions so they would be familiar with her current heartache. Hopefully Liara would recognize the wisdom in doing the same with her own family.

The presence of another biotic field pressing against her own alerted to the fact that someone had entered the room seconds before she heard Sha’ira say softly, “Oh Amanda, I had hoped...” Amanda opened her eyes, lifted her head and then made the mistake of looking up into the matron’s compassionate gaze as the nais gracefully lowered herself to the floor to sit beside her.

“I...” she stopped as her voice broke and the scent of spice and flowers from the Consort’s perfume seemed to fill the air around her.

“Oh, Amanda,” Sha’ira repeated quietly as the nais shifted closer and then wrapped one arm around her shoulders. The asari’s aura wrapped protectively around her as well as it had earlier, pressing comfortably against her own.

‘Asari pheromones smell different for everyone, it depends on what scent associations that individual’s mind makes as to how they smell for that particular person.’ The words from a long-ago
lecture floated through Amanda’s mind as she took in a deep breath of Sha’ira’s scent and felt herself calm down. Was this how she interpreted Asari calming pheromones, Amanda questioned herself as she recalled that Dr. T’Rani had smelled very similar to this. Really!? Part of her mind grumbled in an aggravated tone, even as another part asked if she wouldn’t do the exact same thing if she were an Asari. Wouldn’t she want to calm and comfort those in emotional distress if she had the ability to do so? Amanda knew that the answer would be yes, she would probably do the same thing as Sha’ira and Dr. T’Rani when faced with an upset patient or friend.

Amanda laughed out a huffing sigh that drew a questioning look from Sha’ira. She chose not to respond to it as she decided to simply accept that the asari was trying to help her the best way the nais was able to help. In halting tones Amanda slowly related what Liara had told her, the Blue Suns, the Shadow Broker, the Collectors, the decision to give her body to Cerberus. Then the maiden’s pain and fear of having to go through it again. Succinct, broken, disjointed, but yet forming a whole picture.

“She needs help,” Amanda said, looking over at the matron, “my death so soon after her mother’s hurt her badly…” She closed her eyes, a keen feeling of regret flowing through her. “But she couldn’t turn to her family for help as she did before because they would find out that she had turned my body over to Cerberus.” Amanda opened her eyes, “Can you help her? Is there a way to without violating your ethical and legal responsibilities? And I don’t know yet what the Council wants to say about my reappearance.”

“I know Matriarch Ashita,” Sha’ira commented. “I will find out from Councilor Tevos what can be said,” Sha’ira assured her softly, her tone reassuring, “and then I will reach out to the Matriarch and let her know you are concerned for Liara.”

“That’s alright?” Amanda questioned, concerned, “you can do that without getting into any trouble?”

An amused expression crossed the Consorts face, ‘Contact the Potenia of a Lineage with a concern about one of her family’s maidens? Certainly. Indeed, most asari would say that I was actually violating my responsibilities as a Consort if I did not do so.”

Right, Amanda thought, the Asari had very differing expectations of responsibility and privacy concerning the rights of individuals vs their families. Human laws most often upheld the individual’s rights over the wishes of their families, while Asari laws emphasized an individual’s duties to their Lineages and the Lineages duties and responsibilities to its family members and those associated with it.

“Thank you,” Amanda responded, “I really appreciate it.”

“Of course,” the matron responded to her.

Shepard let out a weary sigh, Sha’ira’s offer of help for Liara relieved her of one burden, but it also meant that she did not have Liara’s troubles as a focus to take her mind off her own feelings. Right now, they were a jumbled mess of sadness, regret, resignation and a touch of anger inside her trying to compete with her weariness.

Sha’ira’s arm around her shoulders briefly tightened in a one-armed hug before the matron pulled away and rose to her feet. Amanda looked up inquiringly and the nais extended one blue hand toward her to help her rise. “Come, let us move to a more comfortable location than this.”

That actually sounded like a very good idea. Amanda accepted the hand, but rose mostly under her own power. Synthetic muscle weighted more than natural and quite a lot of her musculature had to be replaced, thus she weighted quite a bit more than one would guess looking at her. She followed
the nais back down the corridor to the hallway that bordered the common gathering room in the center of the building. Once they got there she could hear the sound of conversation and merry laughter coming from the room. Sha’ira did not head that way however, but turned into a room off the side that proved to be a kitchen.

Amanda groaned under her breath, she still felt full from Tela and Alena putting food in front of her all afternoon. Sha’ira heard it and gave a light, amused laugh, “Do not worry,” the matron assured her, “I am not expecting you to be interested in a full meal.” The nais opened one of the large refrigerators and looked inside, “But I have not yet had any dinner, and desire something to eat.”

“Oh,” Shepard felt embarrassed, “Of course, I guess I kept you from eating with your acolytes.”

“I’m sure they were alright without my presence for one night,” Sha’ira assured in an amused tone as the nais began pulling out several containers and setting them on the counter.

Upon seeing the matron set two plates upon the counter, Amanda groaned in protest, “Really Sha’ira I can’t eat that much more. I know I’m underweight, but really…I cannot gain it back in one day no matter how hard you three are trying.”

The matron laughed again, and Amanda had to smile at hearing it, even Sha’ira’s laughter was melodically perfectly on note. “Do not worry, I will not give you that much, just enough for you to have something to eat while I have my meal.”

Shepard wasn’t really sure the matron was being entirely truthful with her, or just phrasing things persuasively to get her to eat just a bit more. She shook her head, giving in, “Alright.” If she didn’t want it, she told herself, then she simply wouldn’t eat it.

When Sha’ira put both plates of reheated food on the table Amanda eyed her own dubiously, evidently the matron had a rather different idea of how much ‘just enough’ than she did, for though the portions of each type of food were not that big there were six of them upon her plate. Looking at the food in front of her, she had to admire how each little serving upon her plate was nicely arranged and presented. She hadn’t noticed the nais taking any undue time to fuss over it before sticking the plate in the convection microwave either. The benefit of a long life she knew from her Prothean memories, you simply had the time to master multiple skills.

To Amanda’s surprise, Sha’ira did not mention what had happened between she and Liara over dinner. Mostly they discussed the dinner itself. What each of the dishes were and how they were prepared. Even some interesting historical information about each dish, what part of Thessia it originated from and why. Amanda now knew more than she had ever known about the various regions of Thessia and how they differed from one another - at least cuisine wise. As the conversation wore down, Amanda realized with surprise that she had finished everything upon her plate. From the hint of satisfaction on Sha’ira’s face as the nais picked up her empty plate, Amanda suspected that the matron had deftly guided the flow of the conversation and pace of the dinner to ensure just this outcome. Goddess save her from matrons, Amanda thought with equal parts humor and wariness, they really seemed intent on feeding her back up to her optimal weight in as short a time as possible.

“Come,” Sha’ira held out her hands toward her after adding their dishes to the load in the dish washer, “now that neither of us is hungry, let us retire to a more private room.” As if to underscore her point, a burst of laughter from the nearby gathering room had both of them glancing toward the doorway. Amanda followed the matron down yet another corridor to a very luxurious looking sitting room with what looked very much like three low chaise lounge sofas arranged around a central tea table. Once they had each settled upon one of the cream-colored lounges, Sha’ira asked her, “How are you feeling?”
Shepard looked at the asari who was draped elegantly over the arm of her chaise lounge with a faint smile. She didn’t think she looked nearly so elegant as she tried to find a comfortable position on the piece of furniture. “Sad, tired, resigned,” she admitted as she gave up trying to sit up straight and simply decided to mirror Sha’ira’s pose with her legs up and arm draped over the support. Now at least somewhat comfortable she continued, “Unsurprisingly a bit depressed feeling.”

Sha’ira looked concerned at that, “Do you have any regrets now about contacting her tonight?”

‘Did she wish that she hadn’t done it?’ Amanda rephrased the nais’s question in her mind. She thought about it and then shook her head. “No, it’s better to know now rather than later when it might have been much harder to have a private conversation between us.”

The matron inclined her head in acknowledgment of the answer, and then paused to study her thoughtfully. Finally, the nais said, “I have the sense that this outcome does not entirely surprise you?”

Amanda gave a bitter laugh, “I know the reputation of maidens, Sha’ira, you go out with them for partying and friendship not picket fences and children. Trying to ignore that or trying to change gears midstream is just setting yourself up for heartache, but Liara was so smart and seemed so much more mature than any other Asari maiden I had met before…” she sighed, “that I decided to take the risk…” Amanda shook her head a single time, “I was so certain that despite her age we would beat the odds against us. And then I died, and was dead for two years. So am I surprised, no. It was two years, I was dead. Even though she knew I might be alive again sometime in the future… Still it was two years. I was afraid that without a connection between us she might have moved on and not been interested in reigniting what we had together.” She sighed and leaned her head back against the backrest of the chaise lounge and closed her eyes, she was beginning to get a rather bad headache. “I wasn’t expecting her to be so traumatized by my death though that she couldn’t face the idea of feeling that pain again…”

“No, I imagine you weren’t,” Sha’ira responded quietly, then she inquired, “Headache?”

“Yea, getting a bit of a one,” Amanda replied. She heard the matron get up and lazily opened her eyes enough to watch the nais come over to stand beside her.

“Sit up and let me sit behind you,” Sha’ira motioned to her, “there is a biotic massage technique, Paihosaenh, which I can use to help that won’t irritate your skin.” Really? Amanda thought with interest as she straightened with a muted groan and then moved to the open end of the chaise lounge. She wondered if that was what Tela had used in the shuttle earlier today. “If you could remove your uniform jacket?” the matron requested as the nais sat down behind her, “I think your under-layer is thin enough that it won’t interfere with the massage.”

“Sure,” Shepard undid the blue and silver jacket and slid out of it with a bit of relief. It was surprisingly comfortable, but still the high neck of it was a bit confining. She carefully folded it and laid it on the tea table. The hood, which she had folded up and tucked in the jacket’s belt as they left the garden earlier, she placed on top of it.

Sha’ira’s touch lightened and then Amanda felt the matron’s aura intensify as the nais focused on her biotics, but simply kneaded along the trapezius muscle. The matron sighed, “This muscle and up into your neck is very tensed, if it’s not contributing to your headache I’d be very surprised.”

Sha’ira’s touch lightened and then Amanda felt the matron’s aura intensify as the nais focused on her biotics and Shepard felt the mass effect field through the light underlayer she was wearing. It felt as if a dozen tiny balls were rhythmically rolling and vibrating against her tense muscles. Amanda
groaned in appreciation at how it felt and let her head loll forward so that Sha’ira could have maximum access to her shoulders and neck. It did feel very similar to what Tela had done earlier and very similar to the technique she knew from Lindariel’s memories. “This is very similar to a Prothean technique called Nestaidhor,” Amanda said what was in her thoughts, “it roughly translates into healing with the hands.”

The matron’s hands slowed for a moment, “Intriguing, that is also essentially the translation of Paihosaenh. Were the Protheans also natural biotics?”

“I believe so,” Amanda replied after a moment, thinking of how to phrase her answer, “or at least all the information about them I have access to so far indicates that they were all biotics.”

Sha’ira made a soft thoughtful sounding “Hmm, then perhaps it is unsurprising that both species developed a method for utilizing their biotics for massage and healing.” Amanda made a noise of agreement, far more focused on how good the matron’s hands felt as they thrummed along her shoulders and neck, massaging away the accumulated tension bound up in her tense muscles. Awhile later the matron pulled gently on her shoulders, “Lean back against me so that I can reach your scalp and temples.”

Amanda did so without protest, allowing Sha’ira to guide her backward until she was resting against the matron with her head cushioned on the nais’s chest. Then the Consort began softly stroking her hands along Amanda’s scalp, running her fingers through the short auburn hair. The matron’s biotics still felt like rolling balls, but much smaller ones and the pressure was much gentler. Quite frankly Amanda thought it felt marvelous and very relaxing. She felt the last of her tension flowing away and made the effort to just not think of anything. Choosing instead to let herself be soothed by Sha’ira’s stroking hands through her hair and along her temples.

Shepard didn’t realize she had dropped off until she woke up at feeling herself being biotically lifted into the air. She made a noise of protest as she woke up only for Sha’ira to gently reprove her, “Do not undo all the work I have just done, relax and let me care for you tonight.” They didn’t go far, for only a few seconds later the matron lowered her onto a well cushioned surface. The nais pulled off her boots and then she felt covers being pulled over her body. “Rest and sleep Amanda, you are safe here,” Sha’ira’s quiet words were reassuring and Amanda let herself relax again and slip back into sleep.

A little while later she woke up slightly again when she felt the bed dip as someone slipped in with her. “It is just me,” she groggily heard Sha’ira’s soft voice reassure her as the matron pulled her into a lose embrace, the nais’s body curling around her own. “You are tossing and turning,” the matron informed her, “let my presence soothe you so you can rest more peacefully.” Still half-asleep Amanda grumbled at that, but Sha’ira’s fingers were already stroking slowly through her hair. As tired as she still felt, the calming sensation made it difficult to fully waken. “Sleep Amanda,” the Consort whispered to her, “everything will be easier to deal with once you are well rested.” With the comforting press of the matron’s body behind her and the scent of spice and flowers surrounding her, Amanda’s tired and emotionally exhausted mind decided those sounded like very wise words…
13 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 10

Amanda woke up slowly the next morning, opening her eyes and then rolling onto her back to look across the empty bed. She was alone in the room, the only reminder of Sha’ira’s comforting presence during the night the lingering spicy floral scent of the nais’s pheromones on the royal blue silken sheets. Sitting up in the bed Shepard glanced down at her omni-bracelet for the time and her brow rose in dismay. She hadn’t planned on sleeping in this late, but apparently Sha’ira had felt that letting her sleep as long as she needed was more important than their planned early morning training. Then again, she thought with a slight rueful smile, for all she knew the matron would present her with a completely revised schedule for the day which already accounted for her late rising when she emerged from her room.

Pushing down the sheets and comforter, she slipped her legs over to the side of the bed and sat on the edge. Taking a quick internal check of how she felt, Amanda had to acknowledge that she did feel much better this morning. She was still sad and grieving the end of her relationship with Liara, but those emotions no longer felt as raw and overwhelming as they had last night. Looking around she saw three doors, two of which were open. One led to the sitting room they had talked in last night, which explained how Sha’ira had been able to move her to the bed so quickly. The other door led to a richly appointed bathing room, complete with both a deep, jetted bath in one corner and a waterfall shower in the other. Inside, placed upon the cabinet next to the sink where she would notice them the moment she walked into the bathroom, she found a new asari-style Spectre uniform and underwear for her to wear.

Once she had showered, Amanda checked her still healing skin and was pleased to see looked much better than it had yesterday with no sign of irritation at all around the edges. She changed into the clean Spectre uniform, tucked the hood into her belt, exited the room, and began retracing her way back to the compound’s kitchen. She was investigating the refrigerators, searching for something to have for breakfast when Carya came into the room. The maiden looked offended when she explained what she was trying to find and promptly shooed her over to sit at the table while the nais began preparing a breakfast for her.

“Dr. T’Rani’s office sent over some nutritional supplements for you,” Carya informed her as the maiden placed a full juice glass in front of her, “they will ensure you get all the nutrients you need while your body acclimatizes to your cybernetics.” Amanda stared dubiously at the liquid in the glass…which was a brilliant turquoise in color. Upon noticing her expression, Carya laughed, “It is
pelidnon puree, Spectre Shepard, a popular fruit native to Thessia. It is quite pleasing the taste, I assure you.”

As the acolyte began cooking at the stove, Amanda took a tentative sip of the juice. It was thick, more like a smoothie than juice, but then the maiden had said this was a fruit puree and not a fruit juice. As for the taste…she took a second sip, then a third as she made up her mind about it. A bit like pear, she finally decided, but mixed with a hint of apple and melon. Not bad at all, she decided as she took another sip, even if the color seemed a bit unusual. Then again, she had seen pictures of Thessia and been amazed at the colorfulness of the plants and trees, so it probably wasn’t that unusual to the Asari.

Ten minutes later Carya deftly placed a deep-dish plate in front of her; the deep well in the center filled with a stack of what looked like alternating slices of colorful blue and purple and cream-colored fruit, flatbread and pinkish meat topped with a generous dollop of reddish syrup. “This is anachauros,” the maiden informed her as the nais sat down at the table with her, “it’s a common breakfast served to Commandos during training or any day they are expecting to utilize their biotics at combat capacity.”

“So,” Shepard picked up her utensils, a knife and Asari three-pronged fork and began cutting into the stack, “what is everything?” She listened as Carya began describing the various thinly sliced fruits used as she impaled a bite-full of the dish and had her first taste of it. Her first impression of the meal was that it was dense, sweet and savory both, and not something that most humans, unless they were world class athletes or bodybuilders, would probably ever eat. She wouldn’t be surprised at all to find out the dish provided three to four thousand calories in one sitting. The meat was smoked cervus meat, a massive, vaguely oxen-like, domesticated horned reptile from Thessia. The reddish syrup over the top was made from the tuwean fruit, a Thessian fruit that grew in the planet’s many marshlands. The flatbread was a fiber-rich cake made from the flour and bran of atto, which was similar to Earth’s oat grain.

Shepard pushed away from the table with a contented sigh; the anachauros had been excellent, and, contrary to her initial concern at its density, she didn’t feel overfull…or at least not uncomfortably overfull. “The Consort will be able to meet with you in approximately thirty minutes,” Carya informed her, “she mentioned something about training?”

“Oh,” Shepard said in surprise. She honestly had thought that they would not be able to do the training during this visit due to her sleeping late, “That’s good news.”

“She said that you could wait in the central gathering room until she is free,” the maiden dipped her head toward the kitchen doorway, “do you know where it is?”

“Yes,” Shepard replied, remembering the sounds of conversation and laughter the night before, “it’s just right out the door and then left to the area at the center of the building, right?”

After being politely rebuffed in her efforts to help with the clean-up, Shepard made her way to the common gathering room. She paused just after entering, looking around curiously. Before last night she had never been in the private living quarters area of the compound, only the public part that the Consort used for her business. Her gaze took in the bookcases placed on the side walls in between the two doorways on each side, then the huge display screen on one end of the room. Couches and chairs in blue and cream were placed around the room, forming various conversational areas.

She turned her head and looked toward the far end of the room. Various smaller wind, stringed and percussion musical instruments were displayed in protective glass cases hung upon the wall while their larger cousins were resting in their stands upon the floor. In the left corner was a grand piano, and in the right…a dual yeiattiavo keyboard. Amanda’s eyes widened in surprise at seeing the
instruments, and the dual keyboard in particular, and she immediately headed to that end of the room.

Stopping in front of the yeiattiavo, Amanda reached out and brushed her fingers over the matte black surface of the keyboard, marveling at how much it looked and felt like the one in her dream. This was the Asari equivalent of the instrument the Prothean musician had been playing in her dream, a fealindale. Stepping around the instrument she sat down on the bench behind it and glanced around for the power switch. There, she found the switch on the right side and powered up the keyboard.

The Asari yeiattiavo, like the Prothean fealindale in her dream was played both by interacting with the keys and with one’s biotics. Even sustaining a chord was done with one’s biotics instead of with foot pedals as with a piano. Amanda focused on her aura and smiled as she was now able to feel the weak mass effect fields produced by the eezo modules located within the device. The amount of eezo in each module was minuscule, just enough to form a weak mass effect field when electricity was applied to it. Each eezo module, and she could sense fifteen of them, was in essence an input control that she could interact with using her biotics.

She placed her hands on the lower keyboard and began picking out various notes, making sure she knew where the C keys were located and verifying the layout of the keyboard. It was probably a testament to the universality of music that there were only minor differences between the standard key placement of Human, Asari and Prothean keyboards. For this though, Shepard’s grey eyes narrowed, she really wanted the Prothean keyboard layout since she would be reaching into those memories to play upon the instrument. She lifted her omni-bracelet, activated the haptic interface and did a search for any open data interface within the immediate area. There it was, she smiled with satisfaction as she identified the manufacturer and make of the instrument and initiated the connection.

After poking around in the interface for a few minutes, she was able to figure out how she could create a custom key layout for herself as well as specifying the biotic input mapping for each eezo module; that included mapping out what instrument sound should correspond to what type of input. Some of the Prothean instruments didn’t have direct analogues, in that case she simply chose what she thought would be the closest among the available options. After she was satisfied with her changes, she named the custom layout ‘Fealindale’ and saved it. Since Sha’ira had given her guest right, hopefully this wouldn’t be the only time she was able to play. She activated the layout and then watched with surprise and intrigue as the keyboard’s molded matte surface actually rearranged itself to match her custom layout. Ok, Amanda thought after it was done, that was unexpected, but neat. It also made finding the keys much easier, especially since one of the major differences in layout between the fealindale and the yeiattiavo, and the piano for that matter, was that they were laid out for five fingers and the fealindale was laid out for three.

Now finally ready, Amanda focused on her biotics as she placed her hands on the keyboard and reached into her memory of the dream. She started out slowly, getting used to the idea of pressing the keys and using her biotics to manipulate the instruments sensitive mass effect field. As she grew accustomed to playing the keyboard and using her biotics to manipulate it at the same time, her playing became smoother. This had been second nature to the Prothean musician, simple as riding a bike once the skill was mastered…but not so simple for her just yet. As soon as she was able to play some simple chording exercises at proper tempo Amanda stopped and then began playing the same piece as the Prothean musician had been playing in the dream.

Liara would probably be fascinated to hear this, the thought went through her mind and was quickly followed by pain as she realized that she wasn’t certain she would ever mention it to the maiden after last night. For one thing it smacked too much of desperation, of dangling something in front of the maiden that she knew would get her full attention, for her pride to rest easy with the idea. Shepard sighed unhappily as she stopped playing, no she probably wouldn’t mention anything to Liara about
the changes in the Cipher, or at least not mention them anytime soon.

Amanda stared off into space as it hit her how many things she wouldn't be sharing with Liara anymore. The small things like delighting in the maiden’s enthusiasm when the nais talked about her archaeological digs or some paper she had just read, and the big things like sharing her hopes and fears with the maiden and having Liara’s emotional support behind her when she most needed it as well as being there for Liara in the same way when the maiden needed it. Shepard let out her breath as she pinched her nose, fighting against a sudden urge to cry. Perhaps someday they might share such things again as friends. First though, she knew she needed some time to let go of the desire to share them as lovers rather than friends before they could reach that stage. Her emotions under control again, or at least enough that she wasn’t going to start crying, Shepard lowered her hand back to the keyboard. After a moment, her fingers began wandering over the keys, delicately picking out the first bars of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata as it seemed to fit her current melancholic mood.

Did that Prothean musician know any music like this, Amanda wondered, as she played the first movement of the Sonata. Did they have slow, sad songs that expressed what they were feeling in their hearts through their music? She closed her eyes and focused on the sounds she was creating as her fingers played the chords and her biotics carefully manipulated the phrasing of it to accentuate the expression of the notes. While doing so she was reaching back into her memory of the dream, focusing on how the Prothean woman had used her biotics to control how the *fealindale* produced each note. Yes, she had done it exactly this way, Amanda thought as she willingly submerged herself in the Cipher memory…

Alassë closed her eyes and focused on the music. It was especially important to her that she played this perfectly tonight, for this was the first time she would be playing the piece for an audience other than her father. She had composed it almost a year ago following the death of her dear friend and lover, Ayas Keldithas. The man that she had thought she would spend the rest of her life with until he died in the line of duty. Until recently however, she hadn’t felt as if she had recovered enough from his death to perform it in public. Now though, although her heart still ached from his loss the pain was no longer so immediate for her.

She began playing slowly at first in a brief, repeating tune, each pensive chord accompanied by muted pulses of dark emerald biotics. Then she began bringing in more complexity to the melody, as well as bringing in the first mournful strains of a *diathou*, a midrange stringed instrument. The muted pulses of dark emerald around her became interwoven with the slow swirling of a lighter emerald as the *diathou*’s tones carried above the traditional notes of the *fealindale*. She played, one hand on the upper keyboard and one on the lower, her fingers sliding over the pressure sensitive keys to create the tones. As she finished the first measure, she returned to the simple pensive chording of before, only now with the *diathou* along with it. This was not the usual complexly layered composition she usually created, but a bare, sparse arrangement with the minimum of instruments.

Again and again she played variations on the melodic line while always returning to the simple pensive refrain, for this is how memory was - always it returned to the loss whenever you thought of the person. Happier memories, thoughts of the future that might have been, all punctuated by the stark reminder that the person in them was gone. There would be no new happy memories, that future would never come about for that person was no longer there to make them with you, build it with you. Three quarters of the way into the piece she shifted the tone, the refrain shifting from pensive to gently melancholic. The dark green of the chords also lightened to deep emerald as the tune shifted from mourning, from grieving the loss, to a measure of acceptance of it. She dropped out the *diathou* near the end, letting the piece quietly end on the same three chords as it had begun…only now they conveyed a farewell. She let the emerald of her biotics die away, bowed her head for a quiet moment with all four of her eyes closed then lifted her chin and opened them.
Alassë was expecting to see the darkened auditorium in which she had begun, but instead to her shocked surprise she was in an entirely different location. She was in a room, a much smaller one and instead of her audience she only saw three unfamiliar blue-hued aliens that from their appearance were mammalian-type females. The one in front was wearing a long flowing garment while the other two were in armor. The Prothean female frowned, it was not Empire armor either for it was completely of the wrong design and color. Before she could utter the question forming on her tongue, ‘Who are you and where am I?’, the lead alien spoke an unintelligible word to her…or was it? The sound seemed oddly familiar to the musician and she frowned at the blue alien in confusion as she tried to place it….

The blue alien female repeated the word she had spoken before, only in a more concerned tone. “Amanda?”

Shepard shook her head slightly trying to clear it as the Cipher memory receded into the background. “Sha’ira,” she finally replied as her mind cleared and she knew who and where she was…and who were the other two ‘aliens’ who had just witnessed what had happened to her. Just fucking lovely, Shepard thought to herself, she wasn’t certain what the Council would do if they realized the extent to which these Cipher memories affected her - especially the first time she experienced them.

“Tela,” she met the matron’s sharply inquisitive gaze, then shifted over to the half-foot taller asari next to her who was also regarding her with keen interest, “Alena.” Try to bluff it out or give them just enough of the truth? Shepard pondered the question as she noted Vasir’s crossed arms and M’Tara’s fisted hands on her hips. Not as defensive as the day before since neither was barriered, but definitely suspicious. She really wished she had considered that there might be more than one memory in the Cipher of the musician before she started playing. Nothing to do about it now though other than damage control. Oh well, Shepard wryly thought to herself, at least she knew the Prothean female’s name now, it was Alassë Lanthoryl.

“Interesting,” Alena spoke first, her purple-eyed gaze intent on Shepard as she commented, “the last time I felt something like that it was while two other asari were melding.” Shepard tilted her head to the side in bemusement as she focused on the tall lavender-hued asari. That was rather interesting to know, it might even be an important clue to how her mind interacted with the Cipher and what was happening the first time she accessed a memory. On the downside, it also meant that attempting to just brush this off would probably not work out very well for her.

Her attention shifted to Sha’ira as the Consort moved closer, stopping just on the other side of the yeiattiavo. The matron looked down at the custom layout of the keyboard and remarked, “This is laid out for a three fingered hand.”

Exactly how long had they been watching, Shepard wondered as she replied, “Yes, the Protheans were three fingered like Quarians and Turians.”

Past Sha’ira, Tela shifted her stance, drawing Shepard’s attention to the medium-blue nais. Vasir eyed her shrewdly for a long silent moment. Finally, the asari stated, “You didn’t know who we were for a moment did you?”

And there the question was, thought Shepard as she steadily met her fellow Spectre’s brown-eyed gaze. “The memories are very intense the first time I experience them,” she offered part of the truth. It might be enough to satisfy them…

The look Vasir gave her then, with raised brows and a clear - bullshit - look, let her know that the nais was definitely not buying it. She glanced over at M’Tara, the taller asari was also giving her the raised brows look, only the matron was also smirking at her, probably for even trying to get that past them in the first place.
Shepard grimaced, yea well she hadn’t really expected that to entirely work. It was just that she really hadn’t wanted to get into this damnit. “The memory is very intense,” she emphasized, “since I essentially re-live it the first time. After that though recalling it is just like recalling my own memories.” Sha’ira’s eyes narrowed at that admission, but thankfully the Consort was in front of the two Spectres so they didn’t see her reaction. Shepard waited for a moment to see if Sha’ira would say anything but the matron didn’t, keeping yesterday’s confession that Shepard’s own memories were rather Drell like now to herself - at least for right now.

“Re-live?” Tela repeated, looking intrigued, then her gaze sharpened, “that looked like a bit more than mere re-living.”

“There is a short period of…” Shepard paused thinking of what word to use, “disorientation I guess, when the memory ends and I’m still partially caught up in it. It usually only lasts a few seconds.” She quite intentionally left out the part where she sometimes wandered around still thinking she was the person in the memory until something jarred her out of it…like what had just happened with Sha’ira calling her name. If that got back to the Council she could probably kiss her chances of getting back to the ship today, or anytime soon, goodbye.

“Hmm,” Tela responded, her expression somewhere between bemused and dubious as she regarded Shepard. “So, you actually believe you’re the Prothean in the memory? You have no sense of your own identity while you are accessing the memory?”

“None,” Shepard firmly replied, “the first time I access one of the stored beacon messages I’m completely immersed in it to the exclusion of everything else.”

Alena’s brow furrowed as the nais frowned at her, looking rather concerned, “You have no awareness of your actual surroundings? That could be very dangerous.”

Shepard turned to the tall asari, “I’m quite aware,” she replied, “I do not make any attempts to go looking for memories unless I’m in a safe location.”

“So, what happened here?” Tela immediately pounced on the perceived opening.

“The same memory I spoke of yesterday,” Shepard returned her attention to Vasir, “I was attempting to access it in order to recall how to play the fealindale which is very similar to this yeiattiavo.” A smile tugged at her lips as all three matron’s eyes immediately focused on the instrument, they were intrigued she could tell with the bits and pieces of Prothean information she kept parceling out. It was an excellent distraction tactic to keep them from focusing on the contents of the memory rather than the specifics of how she remembered it. Did she feel at all guilty about it? Maybe concerning Sha’ira, but after the other two’s antics yesterday she felt not a bit of guilt about turning the tables on them. Turnabout was fair play after all.

“Then the memory you accessed was not the one that you intended?” Sha’ira asked before the other two nais said anything.

“No, it wasn’t,” Amanda shifted her gaze to the matron standing on the other side of the yeiattiavo, “I was wondering if they had any music like our Moonlight Sonata…” she hesitated for a moment, quibbling in her mind over whether or not to be more specific, then added, “specifically the first movement.”

Sha’ira’s gaze softened in compassion as the nais regarded her, then she inclined her head in understanding. “And that was enough to trigger a different memory…” the Consort said thoughtfully, then, “what song was that you were playing then?”
“I was actually playing?” Amanda asked curiously, she hadn’t been actually sure if she had been playing or if she had stopped as soon as the memory began.

“Yes,” Alena responded before Sha’ira could, “along with quite the biotic light show to accompany it.”

Shepard glanced past Sha’ira to the taller of the two nai standing behind her. “Not really,” she demurred, thinking of how simple the composition had been compared to the piece she had heard in the first Alassë memory, “‘Farewell Beloved’ is pretty minimalist compared to ‘An Afternoon Thunderstorm’.”

One of M’Tara’s brows rose at the reply, “I’ll take your word for it.”

“‘Farewell Beloved’,” Sha’ira repeated softly, but with a hint of a question in her tone.

“Her fiancé, Ayas Keldithas, died a year before the time of the memory,” Shepard responded. “Alassë Lanthoryl was a gifted composer and musician, and that was the composition she created to help her deal with her grief and come to an acceptance of his loss.”

Sha’ira looked thoughtful, “Would you mind playing it for us again?” Amanda gave Sha’ira an inquiring look as did Tela and Alena behind her. The Consort smiled at her, “I would like to hear it again, but also I would like to see how the effects on your aura are different this time.” She frowned slightly, “I am trying to get a better understanding of how these memories are affecting you. As Spectre M’Tara said, the effects on your aura were particularly pronounced when you experienced the memory.” Sha’ira paused for a moment and then added in a bemused tone, “To a point that honestly I would not have believed possible of just a memory if I had not felt the difference in your aura for myself.”

“You’re thinking that every time she recalls a new memory it’s a new deep memory imprint?” Tela questioned with a concerned looking frown.

Alena frowned as well, a look of concern crossing her face, “So what does that mean for her zeukeso? Especially if she keeps getting new memory imprints?”

The Consort turned to glance the tall asari’s way as she answered, “That she will need to meditate more frequently than she would have had to otherwise.” That didn’t sound so bad, Shepard mused, she still had some slack time in her daily schedule. “However,” Sha’ira continued, “I will have a better idea after she interacts with those memories a second time.”

Tela chuckled as she looked over at Shepard and commented, “I believe that sounds like your cue to start playing before we can think up any more questions to ask.”

“I believe it does,” Shepard agreed as she resettled herself upon the bench to play, “Alright, ‘Namarië Melda’ or ‘Farewell Beloved’.” She took in a deep breath, closed her eyes and tried to ignore the fact that she had three sets of inquisitive eyes and their matching inquisitive aura’s all focused on her as she carefully focused solely on the memory she wanted…this was definitely not the time to accidentally find yet another Alassë memory.

She focused on the yeiattiavo, sensing its weak mass effect field controls and began with the first three slow notes. Letting them fall like three separate drops onto a smooth, still pool. After that it was easy to submerge herself into the memory and into the emotions - loss, regret, and grief - that the piece drew forth from her until it ended on the same three notes. It wasn’t until then that Amanda realized that the second time through the lament had been one time too many for her tenuous emotional control. As the sense of Alassë, her thoughts and knowledge, faded away she became
aware of the tears slipping from her eyes.

Spice and flowers filled her nose and then Sha’ira’s arms wrapped around her from behind as the matron pulled her into a comforting embrace. No, Amanda thought, as she fought against her grief, she did not want to do this in front of the other two Spectres. Sha’ira she was comfortable with, but not the other two asari...

A moment later she felt a hand smooth over her head and then to her surprise heard Tela’s voice beside her, “Let out your grief Amanda and do not feel embarrassed for it, for there is no reason to be,” the nais sighed, “it’s not as if either Alena or I haven’t had our share of it over the course of our lives.”

Once she got over her surprise, Shepard’s next thought was how had the other Spectre even known what had happened last night. Had someone listened into her and Liara’s very private conversation the night before? She stiffened as she opened her eyes to glare at the two Spectres through her tears in a confused mix of anger, hurt and betrayal.

“Before you get too upset with anyone,” Alena quickly commented before Amanda actually made any accusations, “you should know that all confidential Consort communications have to be authorized and then officially setup and taken down once they are completed. We were informed this morning that you had spoken to Maiden Liara T’Soni under Consort Sha’ira’s seal of confidentiality after we left last night. We had hoped for your sake that…” the tall asari paused, her expression softening as the nais regarded Shepard. The naturally marked matron did not actually finish her sentence, instead returning to the topic of the call itself, “Your call was not monitored Amanda, it was simply not difficult for us to guess why you would call the maiden.”

“Oh…” Shepard’s shoulders slumped as all the anger abruptly drained out of her leaving a confused morass of grief and still lingering feelings of hurt and betrayal. No, provided you already knew they had been lovers it wouldn’t be that difficult to guess what would be the topic of conversation.

“Sorry,” she fought through her feelings to meet both of their gazes and apologize to the both of them for making the unsubstantiated leap in logic in the first place, “I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.”

Vasir gave her a contemplative look and then said, “Given your unfamiliarity with the process it is understandable that you would wonder how we knew about the call in the first place.” The matron paused for a long moment, then finally added in a gentler tone, “Just in the future I would request that you ask before thinking the worst of us please.”

Amanda immediately felt even more guilty. Before she could reiterate her apology though Alena spoke up, “Don’t worry about it so much,” the tall nais kindly, but firmly advised as she rolled her shoulders in an asari shrug. “Tela and I will give you two sometime alone. Join us for tea when you feel up to it,” the tall asari inclined her head toward the other end of the room. Shepard glanced over that way to see Carya setting up a tea service for them. She had been so caught up in the conversation that she hadn’t even noticed the acolyte entering the room.

“Alight,” she replied, and as the tall asari turned added, “thank you.” Alena paused, gave her a slight smile and reassuring look before taking a few long strides to catch up to Tela who was already headed in that direction. Shepard stared after them in bemusement, she hadn’t expected them to show her so much kindness. It was surprising to say the least, but part of her had to wonder where they had been two years ago when she had been floundering so badly while chasing after Saren.

Pressure on the top of her head brought Amanda out of her thoughts, “I do apologize Amanda,” Sha’ira said very quietly. The matron’s voice seemed right above her ear and Shepard realized that the nais must be resting her cheek upon her head. “I let my fascination with the changes to your
aura,” Sha’ira continued, “and my concern for how it might affect your zeukeso blind me to the probably that the song would deeply affect you.”

“I didn’t think about it either,” Amanda ruefully admitted as she carefully wiped her tears away with her fingers, “and I knew how close my emotions were to the surface this morning.” She rested her hands on Sha’ira’s arms wrapped around her and settled back against the matron’s body behind her. She needed to join the other two Spectres and get started on the day…but she could let her ragged emotions be soothed by the Consort’s touch for at least another few minutes. Finally, she squeezed Sha’ira’s forearms underneath her hands, signaling to the matron that she was ready to be released. The light pressure on the top of her head went away as the nais behind her straightened up and then released her, stepping back so she could rise from the yeiattiavo’s bench.

The two of them joined Tela and Alena at the table, Amanda pausing for a moment to pour tea for both her and Sha’ira before sitting down as a way of thanking the matron. Shepard brought the delicate cup to her lips and took sip of the tea, savoring the fragrant scent and taste of it as she ordered her thoughts. She turned her attention to Sha’ira, “So what did you sense when I played?”

The Consort’s blue eyes narrowed contemplatively over her own teacup as she took a sip. “That your aura both felt as if were shifting,” she responded, “as I would expect in a case of severe zeukeso, and as if you were melding with someone, though not as strongly as before.” The matron didn’t say anything else for a moment, but then she added, “It was very unique, I cannot say that I have ever felt anything quite like it before.”

“It still felt as if I were melding?” Shepard hadn’t expected that, “But I knew it was just a memory. I mean I was really focused on it to know how to play, but I never lost awareness of myself or of my surroundings.”

“That may be,” Alena added her observation, “But Sha’ira is correct, it did feel exactly like that…very odd.”

Shepard thought about that for a few moments, “Maybe it’s due to the beacon messages in my mind being stored in the same physical location as they would be for an Asari?” She indicated herself, “But obviously I’m not one so my mind isn’t making the same type of connection to it?” She thought back to the scan Dr. Chakwas had done, “In the brain activity scan that was done, when I thought of the memories that area was activated so there are memory pathways linked to it.”

“That maybe it,” Tela responded thoughtfully, “but sometimes your aura just shifts. We were near enough yesterday that we would have definitely noticed if your aura felt like it just did when you played for us.” Interesting Shepard thought, there was one time yesterday when they might have felt it, but they hadn’t been in the room with her when Anderson revealed that the Collectors might have once been Prothean. Thalion had come forward very strongly for a moment before she had wrested back control of herself.

Sha’ira inclined her head in agreement with Vasir and then added, “When you spoke to me yesterday and your aura shifted, it did not feel as if you were melding with anyone.”

“So, what is the difference?” Tela looked over at Shepard inquiringly as she asked the question.

The last thing Shepard wanted to admit was that the difference was that as far as she was aware she hadn’t been accessing any Prothean memories at the time. No, in each of those instances it had felt as if the Protheans in question had been standing beside or behind her and directly speaking to her. “Those weren’t full memories,” she said, sticking as close to the truth as possible, “or rather I wasn’t focusing on the memories.”
Tela gave her a slightly suspicious look but then Sha’ira mused, “Memories of memories? That might explain the difference.”

Shepard focused on the Consort, ignoring how Tela was studying her, “My own memories of those memories, ones stored where their supposed to be for a human you mean?”

“Perhaps, Sha’ira said, deep in thought, “that would account for it feeling like zeukeso as well. In any case though, we need to move onto the training.” She twisted her wrist and glanced at the golden omni-bracelet she was wearing, “We only have just enough time left to cover the remainder of what you need to know to begin your meditation practice.”

At least she didn’t need to take notes anymore Shepard mused as Sha’ira began discussing the specific characteristics of the memories she should chose to meditate upon.
13 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 11

As soon as she phased in from her flash-step, and the walls and floor of the Republic Embassy’s biotic practice arena resolved into view Tela shifted her weight to her back leg and lifted her right knee in preparation for a snap roundhouse kick only to hesitate as the nais realized her opponent was not in fact standing right in front of her. Sometime within the fraction of a second it had taken her to flash-step across the width of the arena Shepard had moved, but where? Tela instantly focused on her aura, knowing that she could sense if the human was near with it quicker than she could by actually looking around. Out of the corner of her eye Vasir caught a flash of movement on her right about the same time she sensed the human with her aura. Instincts finely honed over centuries of combat prompted the asari Spectre to instantly shift to a more defensive stance and shield along her upraised knee and arm just in time to defend herself from Shepard’s own roundhouse kick. That same instinct also enabled the Commando matron to repulse the human’s attack with a perfectly timed biotic pulse. The result was that Shepard’s leg, which should have slammed into Vasir’s shielded forearm with a noticeable amount of biotically-enhanced power behind it, instead forcefully rebounded, sending the human spinning away from the asari.

That should have been enough to create a brief opening in Shepard’s defenses; to perhaps knock the human off her feet, or at least cause her to reel back as her leg was repulsed. Vasir was certain that with any other human her counter would have indeed had just that effect. Shepard, however, seemed well prepared for it, flowing gracefully with the force of the pulse and actually using the momentum to open a distance between them before settling back into a defensive stance. Vasir had to give the human Spectre this, Shepard was quick, Huntress quick, and Tela suspected that the human had been using her biotics to make herself quicker and stronger for far longer than she had access to these Prothean memories. Vasir was almost certain that whatever skills Shepard had learned from the Cipher had only honed the human’s ability to use dark energy to augment her physical reactions, her speed and strength, in the same way that young Huntresses trainees were taught to use it.

“Much better,” Vasir praised Shepard, “your aura didn’t shift at all that time.”

One of Shepard’s dark brow’s rose and her reddish-pink lips curved as her expression lightened, showed her pleasure at the Senior Spectre’s comment. “Good to know,” Amanda responded, “I guess I’ve actually absorbed more than I thought from Thalion and the others.” A small frown
creased her brow, “Though I have to admit, even though I’ve not had these memories for very long, I’ve already gotten used to pulling on them for their expertise… especially when I’m in combat. It’s a bit of a struggle not to reflexively do that.”

Alena spoke up from where she was leaning against the right-hand side wall, “Then now is a very good time to stop before it turns into a habit.”

“Alena’s right,” Tela immediately backed-up her friend, “the longer you rely on them as an aide the more difficult it will be to keep yourself from pulling”, she found Amanda’s use of that particular word instead of another, such as accessing intriguing, “on those memories in the middle of combat. And you especially do not want to pull on those memories around any Asari.” Tela smirked at the human, “The shifts in your aura when you do are so obvious that even a child would notice it.”

“And while a child would just be curious about what they had just sensed,” M’Tara picked up the conversational thread, “any nearby adults would immediately seek to identify whose aura had just fluctuated in such an odd manner and start wondering why it had occurred.”

“Yea, yea, yea,” Shepard turned her head slightly, just enough to glance toward Alena, “really, I get it. Don’t touch the memories around Asari unless I want them all stopping and staring at me wondering what in world was going on with me. And since I’m trying to stay under the radar out there that’s the last thing I need.”

“Indeed,” Tela’s expression turned serious, “because the next thing any Asari would wonder was how a human could possibly know all the biotic techniques they just saw you use and why you had such a unique aura. You would quickly become the object of intense scrutiny.”

“Unique aura?” Shepard frowned, appearing both puzzled and concerned, “Sha’ira mentioned last night that my aura had changed from two years ago.”

“I’m not an expert on reading auras,” Vasir felt compelled to admit as she responded, “at least not compared to a fully trained Consort or Matriarch. I can however, tell that you have far more life experiences than any almost any other human I have ever met…and those few were clearly among your race’s Matriarchs.”

“Just in case that didn’t make it clear,” M’Tara added with a brief smirk, “what Tela means is you feel much older than you should feel.” The tall nais’ expression turned more serious, “It wouldn’t be unusual if your aura belonged to a more adventuresome maiden or Huntress with nearly two centuries of experience, but to a human of only three decades?”

“Oh,” Shepard’s tone was flat as she absorbed that piece of unwelcome information. “So…” Shepard drew out the word after a moment of silence, “what about the Warlords who will know that I’m human?”

“Oh, they’ll definitely be interested in you,” Alena smirked as she drawled her response, “but you will have Councilor Tevos’ personal backing and they will assume that she knows the reason behind it.” The tall asari Spectre paused a second and then added, “Correctly, as a matter of fact since the Matriarch does know the reason behind it.”

Tela sighed as she rolled her shoulders in a shrug, “You might as well give up on the idea that they won’t be intensely curious about you - they will be. What you wanted was for them not to attack you or your crew as soon as you cross over into League territory. With the Council not only reinstating your status as a Spectre, but also tacitly backing your mission they at least won’t do that.”
Shepard echoed her sigh as she nodded with evident reluctance, “True, that is all I wanted, but I wouldn’t have mended a bit of true anonymity as well.”

Tela actually laughed at that, though not unkindly, as she regarded the human. “Not likely, but perhaps you will be fortunate and they at least won’t be overt about it.” The matron sympathized, but it was not very realistic of Shepard to think that the League Warlords wouldn’t be keeping a very close eye on her and her crew’s activities.

Throughout the entire conversation between the three of them, it hadn’t escaped Vasir’s notice that Shepard had kept up her guard, remaining watchful and wary of her. The nais’ dark blue lips curved up in a smirk, well who was she to disappoint? The two-story, ten-meter tall biotic practice arena within the Asari Republics Embassy on the Presidium they were sparring within was quite sizable at fifty meters by fifty meters square. It had advanced biotic dampeners built into the walls, ceiling and floor, but those were not needed today as they were only utilizing defensive and close quarters combat biotic techniques. Vasir flicked her gaze upward, past the viewing balcony at the first story level of the room, which was inset into the wall and behind a shimmering barrier for safety, to the ceiling. The nais near instantly measured the intervening space above her and then flash-stepped.

The asari Senior Spectre came out of it in mid-air, lightening her body mass with her biotics while letting her forward momentum carry her higher toward the ceiling. It gave Vasir a few more seconds to locate Shepard, which wasn’t hard given that the human hadn’t yet moved. Tela’s brown eyes narrowed, the nais knew full well by now not to expect Shepard to kindly remain there, so the question was where would the human go next? Taking a gamble, the matron flash-stepped again, from mid-air to the far side of the sparring arena. Her brown eyes darted around the arena, seeking Shepard, only for her brows to lower in confusion at seeing that the human was still standing in the center of the arena. What was Amanda up to? Certainly, it wasn’t that she couldn’t have flash-stepped within the same time period.

After taking about ten minutes to lecture Shepard about the reckless of flash-stepping too close to an object when not absolutely needed, and sharing a few horror stories of promising maidens whose lives had been cut abruptly short when they phased in from a flash-step within an object instead of next to it, the two of them had been chasing each other around the arena for the past twenty or so minutes. Shepard had showed absolutely no sign of biotic exhaustion the last time Vasir checked, and the matron had been monitoring the human closely for it. Tela was mindful that Shepard was one, only a human and thus had less reserves and needed a longer biotic recovery period than an asari, two, underweight which would give any biotic even less reserves and make them susceptible to becoming abruptly biotically exhausted if they overextended themselves, and three, still recovering from her reconstructive surgeries.

Quite frankly Tela was impressed with the skill level Shepard had displayed thus far. The matron Commando felt certain that utilizing every technique she knew that she would prevail over the human Spectre in a more serious spar. However, Shepard definitely wouldn’t make it easy for her, and there was even the chance that a mis-step would result in her defeat. That was almost an unthinkable thing for Vasir to seriously consider - a short-lived human winning a spar with her? The matron’s mind rebelled at the thought, and yet…Tela had to admit that it was also intriguing. How much strength of will and mind Amanda Shepard must possess to deal not only with her death and reconstruction, but at the same time deal with these memories and treat them as something to be learned from instead of something to be frightened of and resisted against. Melding with the human would doubtless be intoxicating, and if Amanda were akteria on top of that - as so many humans were within a meld with a matron - it would be even more intoxicating.
Shepard still hadn’t moved, and Vasir eyed the human suspiciously for a few more seconds before finally flash-stepped closer to her. In response, the human settled deeper into her stance and then raised one arm. Her aura shifted in a distinctive way and then the indigo-blue ripple of a biotic barrier formed in front of the human with the origin of the dark energy field centered in a bright vertical line along the upraised length of her forearm. Tela’s brown eyes widened for a fraction of a second in surprise, she had learned this technique long ago during her Commando training, but over the centuries had found little practical use for it. She preferred to stay mobile, out maneuvering an opponent instead of standing still behind a strong barrier. Shepard’s aura shifted even further, and the barrier field became more cohesive and coherent, settling into a well-defined long oval biotic shield. Vasir’s brow rose as she eyed the exceptionally well-formed barrier. She suspected that the knowledge of this particular biotic technique came from Dragahîr Thalion’s memories. Clearly, he had been a master of it judging from what she was seeing…certainly this looked more impressive than what she recalled from her long-ago training. She glanced over to see Alena’s reaction to this only to see that her fellow Spectre had pushed herself away from the wall, an intrigued expression upon her face, and was walking over to take a closer look.

“Reflective shielding,” M’Tara said thoughtfully as she stopped beside Vasir, “haven’t used that in a while.”

The barrier rippled and weakened as Shepard lost her focus, “Why not?” she asked them.

“It’s draining,” Alena responded, “and for the energy you use maintaining it, it’s usually better to stay mobile and just avoid or maneuver around whatever your shielding against.” The tall nais rolled her shoulders in a shrug, “It’s considered a situational technique, and you shouldn’t get yourself in situations where you need to use it quite frankly.”

Tela huffed out a laugh at that, “True, I’ve not had cause to even really think of using it after they taught us it in Commando training.”

The whitish blue of the barrier field around Shepard rippled and faded, and the human frowned at them. “Alright, it does take a lot of energy to hold, but still I’d like to try and master the technique. Thalion considered it to be useful both on the offense and defense. He actually used it quite frequently from his memories - during ship boarding actions whenever he and his team had no choice but to push through the defending pirates to take a passageway - whenever he needed to break through the defenses of a well-fortified position - or just to hold an enemy’s attention while his team mates maneuvered to a more advantageous position.”

“The Matriarch Tevos is correct,” the refined, aristocratic tones of the Asari Councilor had all three Spectres looking upward toward the first-floor viewing balcony, “the technique may be situational, but in those situations it’s use, and ability to reflect an enemies fire back to them, can quickly turn the tide of the battle.” Behind the slight shimmer of the protective barrier Matriarch Tevos stood at the railing, flanked by the four of her personal Commando guards. Tela stared upward in surprise, wondering exactly how long the Councilor and her guards had been watching them. The inset viewing balcony was both obscured by the barrier field and cast into sharp shadow by the ceiling lights so it could have been for quite some time without them noticing. As requested, she had sent a notification of when they started and an estimated time of when they would be done for planning purposes, but the matron certainly hadn’t expected the Matriarch to make a personal appearance. As they were watching the Councilor turned from the balcony railing and stepped back out of sight, a moment later her guards disappeared as well as they followed her. Tela turned her head to glance over at Alena, and the two matron Spectres shared a bemused look with one another over this development.
“Has she been here all along?” Shepard inquired of them in a puzzled tone.

Tela rolled her shoulders in a shrug, “I don’t know, the Matriarch is here now though.” The human shot her a quick sharp glance combined with a slight head tilt indicating human confusion at that statement, then snapped her head back as they heard the sound of a door opening. Two of the Councilor’s personal guard stepped through the double-doorway first, did a quick visual scan of the arena and then stepped aside so that the Councilor herself followed by her last two Commandos could enter the area.

Vasir and M’Tara bowed respectfully as Tevos approached them, greeting the elder nais with a respectful, “Salaa, Councilor Tevos.”

Shepard, for her part, drew herself up stiffly into the Human at-attention stance, “Good morning, Councilor.”

The Councilor inclined her head to the three of them in return, “Salaa, Spectres,” and then focused her attention upon the human between them who had shifted into an at-ease stance. The Matriarch considered the human thoughtfully for a moment before speaking, “Spectre Shepard, I know you have not had much interaction with Asari before you took Liara T’Soni on-board your ship, but you may wish to consider learning the most common forms of formal interactions with all of the Council races.” Before Tevos could say anything more, Shepard broke her military stance and executed an appropriately respectful formal bow to the Matriarch. “Ah,” a brief reflective expression crossed the Matriarch’s face, “I suspect things will become less complicated for you once you formally separate yourself from the Systems Alliance Military. In fact, I believe that is one of the things Councilor Anderson wanted to discuss with you after this training session is over.”

Shepard frowned as she lifted her wrist just enough to quickly check the time on her omni-bracelet. “I understand that your time here is limited today,” The Councilor responded before the human could say anything, “however I believe there is a way to extend it by at least a few more hours.” The Councilor glanced over at Tela and the matron straightened at the attention, “I believe Spectre Vasir needs to go to the Terminus Systems. If she is amenable to leaving today, it would only a short deviation from her flight plan to detour to New Canton and transport you directly to your ship. Utilizing her Spectre credentials for preferential access to Relays with high wait times such as the Widow Relay should shorten your transit time to around an hour.”

Tela was amused at being suddenly volunteered as a shuttle service. She did indeed need to go to Illium and begin her on-site investigation into the activities of Truth Hax, but she really hadn’t planned on leaving this afternoon. It was a good thing she kept a mission bag packed and ready to go. “Of course, I’m already packed and ready to leave,” she smoothly responded to the Matriarch. Out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of the brief annoyed expression that flitted across Alena’s face at this unexpected turn of events. She turned toward Shepard, “It will be my pleasure to offer you a ride there,” she assured the human with warm sincerity before M’Tara could come up with an alternate offer. She smiled serenely as she lifted her gaze from the human to meet Alena’s imperceptibly narrowed lavender eyes which indicated the other matron’s displeasure with this turn of events and her smile widened ever so slightly. Tela saw absolutely no reason why she shouldn’t enjoy this opportunity to tease her friend, especially after Alena’s gloating over the way Amanda had responded to her flirtatious teasing yesterday.

“Hmmm,” the human Spectre made a sound which drew Vasir’s attention back to the human in time to notice raised brow and amused look Amanda was giving her. Evidently, she and Alena’s byplay, even as brief as it had been, hadn’t gone unnoticed. “Thank you,” Shepard said to her fellow Spectre, “that will certainly shave off some time from the regular shuttle service.”
Tela’s expression shifted to something warmer as she regarded the human, “It also gives me time to brief you on Omega, Warlord T’Loak and the League in general.” She elegantly waved a hand as Shepard looked about to speak, “I know you received Systems Alliance briefings, but they cannot possibly understand those waters as well as we understand them.”

Shepard snapped her mouth shut, tilted her head ever so slightly to the left as her expression turned thoughtful, then the human straightened with a decisive nod. “I would appreciate whatever you can share with me that will help me with my mission.”

Humans were so strange, thought Tela, one of the early video documentaries introducing Humans to the galactic community had captured this exact behavior in a humorous image of a pale-skinned, dark-haired human female and one of their domesticated companion species known as a dog staring at an asari visitor. Both human and dog had their heads tilted the exact same direction and angle and, as far as anyone could tell, very similar expressions of uncertainty as they warily observed the unexpected addition to their environment. The video commentator had explained that the behavior had to do with the Earth mammalian common trait of external ears which served as sound channelers directing sound waves down into their inner ears. Tilting the head changed the relative position of each ear on the vertical plane and allowed them to identify with great accuracy the originating source of a sound, an obvious evolutionary advantage. The behavior was instinctual for most Earth mammals when presented with any ambiguous situation, even a purely intellectual one.

“Spectre Shepard,” the Councilor drew their attention back to her, “if you would demonstrate your knowledge of the reflective shield once again.” That seemed to surprise the human given the human’s quick questioning glance toward Vasir. One of Tevos’ brows rose at this, a maiden questioning a matron about following the command of a Matriarch. Tela frowned at Shepard, but before she could verbally respond Tevos continued, “I understand that both Alena and Tela have been advising you against accessing those memories during combat, but in this case I want you to form the best reflective shield you are able to form. If that involves you pulling from the Prothean memories of the Cipher, then please do so in this instance.” Well the Matriarch had been watching them for at least a short while, realized Vasir. Long enough to have overheard that particular conversation at least.

Shepard regarded Tevos for a moment, her expression carefully neutral. After a second, she nodded and very politely replied, “Of course, Councilor.” Was the human that suspicious of the Matriarch, Vasir wondered, or was it only that this was Shepard’s first in-person, face-to-face meeting with her. It was one thing to interact with Councilor Tevos via hologram or other communications device when one only experienced her wisdom and diplomacy, it was another thing to interact with her in person. Then any biotic would feel the power of Matriarch Tevos’ aura thrumming up against their own and be unequivocally reminded of the fact that Asari only grew more powerful with age…and those Matriarchs descended from the Followers of Athame were the most powerful biotics in the known Galaxy.

Tela took a few steps back as Shepard took up a defensive stance once again, one arm raised and clenched in front of her. A moment later the matron moved closer to Councilor Tevos in order to get a better view of the forming shield as the nais felt Shepard’s aura shift, indicating that she was accessing one of the Prothean Cipher memories. Alena followed a moment after, taking up a similar position on the other side of the Matriarch. Shepard’s aura shifted even further as the blueish white haze of the human’s barrier became more coherent and the outline of the reflective barrier shield more distinct.

Vasir glanced out of the corner of her eye at the Matriarch. The matron wondered what Tevos
thought of the way Shepard’s aura was shifting and changing, whether or not it truly felt like zeukeso. Then Tela felt the human’s aura abruptly cross over into the state where it seemed as if she were actually in a meld with someone. Someone who wasn’t there, at least not in person, and snapped her attention back to the human. The coherence and form of the mass effect matrix around Shepard’s body was now so regular that it almost looked like a hybridization of biotic barrier and technical armor with the manner in which the barrier’s dark energy field was ordered into a regular lattice-like arrangement. Tela’s brown eyes widened in appreciation as she regarded it. Her barrier wasn’t even this good, Vasir ruefully recognized, but then again she seldom found herself in a combat situation where she could stand in one place and concentrate primarily on it. Keeping your momentum and advantage in battle meant that you were always splitting your attention between what your enemy was doing, what you were doing now, what your enemy was likely to do next, and what you were going to do next to maintain your initiative and counter it.

Vasir glanced quickly over at Tevos intensely curious to see her reaction. The Matriarch was standing stiffly, her expression composed and alert as she fixed her attention sharply upon Shepard. The matron’s gaze drifted further to the four Commandos arrayed behind Tevos, they were reacting more strongly to Shepard’s bizarre aura, the bluish white haze of a barrier encompassing each of them. None had their hand upon their weapons…yet, but the asari Spectre could see that they were tense and prepared to react forcefully to any sign that the human was a threat to the Matriarch. Tela knew that each of the four Commandos possessed the same level of clearance as the Matriarch, a necessity since they were expected to guarantee her safety in any situation. “This occurs whenever she fully immerses herself within one of the memories,” the asari Spectre informed her Councilor. Vasir noticed Tevos’ blue eyes flicking briefly in her direction before returning to Shepard.

From the other side of the Councilor Alena added, “A similar incident occurred earlier this morning when she played a piece of Prothean music on the veiattiavo at Consort Sha’ira’s compound. I say similar only because the memory she accessed was from a different Prothean,” the tall Spectre explained.

“This is from Dragahîr Thalion Elendel’s memories,” Tela nodded, “he’s the only one we know of who would have this level of expertise in either defensive or offensive biotics.” Vasir paused and then added, “That and I’m becoming familiar with how her aura feels when she’s accessing his memories in particular.”

A slight inclination of Tevos’ head as an acknowledgment of the information they had given silenced Vasir. Custom dictated that the next response come from the Matriarch. “Do your memories from Dragahîr Thalion Elendel include techniques on how to alter the shield so that you can control where it reflects incoming fire?”

Tela turned her attention to Shepard, so far the human hadn’t inserted herself into the conversation at all…even though it concerned the biotic technique she was currently so adroitly demonstrating. “Cenflaid mín Dragahîr, ettelëa,” the human responded in a deeper than normal voice, and Vasir stiffened at the sneering, dismissive tone of the reply. This was the second time Shepard had responded as Thalion, the other time occurring the day before during the second meeting with the Council. Tela had shared memories with Matriarchs before and received strong memory imprints from them, but never had she been overwhelmed by those imprints to the point of losing track of where and who she was much less speaking as that Matriarch. Was it only that Amanda was human and her mind unable to appropriately process these memory imprints? Were the Drell neurochemicals Cerberus had flooded her brain with complicating the issue? Did they have an effect on the imprints that altered them in some manner, making it difficult for Shepard’s mind to maintain a core sense of self whenever the human accessed them?
The questions ran through Vasir’s mind in a flash before the matron found her attention diverted from them as she noticed Shepard’s reflective shield actually thickening along the edges while maintaining its thickness in the center, and as a result taking on a slightly parabolic shape. Tela was startled, the Commando who had taught them the reflective shield technique had never mentioned that you could alter the shape of the shield in such a manner. Though now that she was seeing it, Tela’s brown eyes narrowed thoughtfully, she had some ideas about how it could be done from the varied biotic techniques with which she was already familiar. Certainly, it would make the reflective shielding technique much more tactically useful in wider variety of situations since you would no longer need to be as careful where you placed yourself in relation to the enemy. You could possibly even stay within partial cover with the ability to adjust the shape of the shield and still reflect the enemies fire back at them. Vasir glanced over at the Matriarch, no wonder both Shepard and Tevos had been united in their view of its usefulness. Tela knew that the Matriarch had served for over two hundred years as a Commando in the Ulee Republic Guard and had participated in many anti-piracy and anti-slaver missions. No doubt Tevos had many opportunities to utilize the technique during her time as a Commando.

Shepard’s aura altered once again as the sense of her melding with someone else faded away. Vasir could still feel the influence of the prothean upon the human’s aura, but it no longer felt as if Shepard was actually melding with…him. The matron let out her breath in an exhale of relief as she felt herself relax. The nais hadn’t really anticipated that Thalion’s influence might cause Shepard to attack them, but she didn’t understand quite what was going on with these Cipher imprints or to what extent they might be able to influence the human.

The barrier and shield abruptly faded from around Shepard as the human released the mass effect field, bowed her head and sighed, “Thalion I honestly like you…but sometimes you can be one really arrogant dick,” the last word was particularly emphasized. The human sighed again, and then raised her head to focus on them as she straightened from her defensive stance. “Pardon my language, Councilor.”

Councilor Tevos didn’t immediately reply to Shepard. Instead, the Matriarch stared at the human with a pensive expression upon her face in complete silence. After a few seconds the human shifted uncertainly under the Councilor’s focused regard, it was enough to finally stir the elder asari into speaking. “These memories come with very strong personality imprints.” It was not a question, noted Vasir, but a statement.

A frown creased Shepard’s brow, “Yes…I guess you could say that?” the human didn’t sound quite certain of it. A flash of intense sorrow drew her expression into a sharp frown of pain for a moment before Tela could visibly see her force those emotions back under control, “I’ve melded before, but never experienced anything like this resulting from them.”

Tevos’ grey eyes, which were only a shade darker than Shepard’s lighter grey ones, softened as the Matriarch regarded the human. The Councilor knew what had happened last night in the same way they had known, for she too had received notification that Consort Sha’ira had authorized an encrypted communication’s channel between Shepard and Liara T’Soni last night. The elder nais inclined her head in a slow nod to this response and then continued, “Consort Sha’ira trained you this morning in the appropriate meditation techniques?”

“Yes, she did,” Shepard responded promptly, “along with Spectres Vasir and M’Tara.”

The Matriarch’s expression turned stern, “You will make them a part of your daily routine Spectre Shepard.” Tevos’ tone made it quite clear that she had just made an order and not a request.
Shepard stared at the Matriarch, her brow furrowed and her gaze searching for a long moment before the human slowly nodded her acquiescence. “Yes, Councilor Tevos,” she acknowledged, sounding slightly puzzled, “I will make it a priority.”

Tevos stern expression remained unappeased by this response, and if anything grew even more strict as the Matriarch spoke very firmly to Shepard, “I understand that the information contained within the Cipher is proving to be helpful to you with developing your own biotics and tactics and indeed I suggested that you access them for just that reason. However, what just occurred makes it evident that the potential exists, if you are not cautious, for your identity and personality to be slowly eroded and taken over by these Prothean memory imprints. Rigorous and daily adherence to the meditative techniques Consort Sha’ira taught you should guard you against such effects and will hopefully allow you to continue accessing them without undue risk of adverse consequences.”

Shepard’s grey eyes widened, “I…” Amanda fell briefly silent then nodded, “I understand Councilor, I promise you I will make them a part of my daily routine.” From Shepard’s conciliatory tone, it seemed the Matriarch had finally gotten through to her and the human now realized the elder nais was not being hostile toward her, but protective.

Councilor Tevos steadily regarded the human for a few more moments as if judging Shepard’s sincerity before gracefully dipping her head in acknowledgment. “In addition, you should make an effort to visit the Citadel as frequently as possible given your mission. Either Consort Sha’ira or I will be able to inform you whether your aura indicates you are being overly affected by these imprints.”

“Yes, Councilor,” Shepard replied, “I’m not sure how often that will be, but I will make sure I check in with one or the other of you each time.”

“Very well,” Tevos responded, then shifted back to the previous subject of conversation. “Do you believe that you can now form a reflective biotic shield without relying upon Dragahir Thalion Elendel’s memories?”

Tela smirked at the flash of relief that crossed Shepard's face at the topic change. Then the human frowned thoughtfully as she considered the question. “I think so,” Shepard responded after a few seconds. “I may have to review those memories a few more times though to get down the subtle mnemonics he used as well as the nuances of all the various techniques involved in it. Make sure I understand exactly how the hardened barrier and shield feel when they’re done correctly, and the various ways of manipulating the shield to alter its shape.”

Councilor Tevos inclined her head in understanding, “Do you feel confident in making the attempt against a training drone?”

“Certainly,” Shepard didn’t hesitate to answer, “I could use the practice, make sure I understand how to shape the shield and direct the ricochets where I want them to go.”

At the human’s response, Councilor Tevos glanced over at Tela, “If you would Spectre Vasir.”

Tela dipped her head, “Of course, Councilor,” the matron responded as she raised her arm to activate her omni-bracelet. The three Spectres were all wearing Asari style formal Spectre outfits again since that was what Shepard was wearing and they were still escorting her around the Citadel. For sparring, they had taken off the hoods and jackets leaving them in the high-necked undersuit which was made of the same material as their Spectre-level combat undersuits and so offered a basic level of ballistic protection. Using her omni-tool Tela activated one of the arena’s many stored training
drones and a nearby access hatch opened to release it into the practice arena. The small combat
drone quickly floated over to the medium-blue nais and then hovered in front of her awaiting
instructions. The training drone was piloted by a very basic level VI and equipped with a pistol
grade weapon that utilized non-lethal micro-pellets as rounds. Any armor or basic barrier was
sufficient to protect against it, and as a safety measure it was designed to shut down if it sensed that
its target might actually be harmed by it. With a few taps on her omni-bracelet’s haptic interface
Vasir setup the parameters for the droid and then looked over to Shepard, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Shepard stepped back into a defensive stance, her left forearm raised and then summoned a basic
barrier which shimmered bluish-white around her body. The human closed her eyes, her expression
set in frowning concentration as she focused her attention. The barrier around her grew more
coherent, and, at the same time, a reflective shield formed in front of her upraised forearm. Both
shield and barrier continued to grow more distinct and coherent for a few seconds, and then all
progress seemed to come to a halt. Tela suspected this was about as far as the human could get on
her own, and honestly it was an excellent effort for only having practiced the technique twice before
now. Shepard finally huffed out an annoyed sounding breath and her aura shifted, not as far as
earlier, but definitely enough for the watching asari to tell that she was accessing Dragahîr Thalion’s
memories. In the next few seconds the barrier around Shepard and the oval barrier shield in front of
her became extremely coherent, taking on the barrier/tech-armor hybrid appearance it had earlier.

Tela glanced out of the corner of her eye at Councilor Tevos, the Matriarch had a subtly impressed
expression as the elder nais beheld Shepard’s barrier and reflective shielding. No wonder, thought
Vasir as she returned her attention to it. She had never witnessed a finer barrier, Dragahîr Thalion
definitely had been a true master for this was a work of artistry in dark energy. The matron had to
admit that she was starting to feel rather envious of Shepard for possessing his memories—even if
those memories came with the threat of zeukeso, and Protheans in general seemed to be oppressively
speciesist.

Of course there was the possibility, her gaze focused on the human forming the barrier, of simply
asking if she could meld with Amanda and see them for herself. Vasir frowned slightly at the
thought, for one thing, given Amanda’s current uncertain Spectre status and her own status as a
Senior Spectre, even asking could be considered to be coercive in nature and the nais didn’t want to
do anything that would damage the fragile growing trust between them. Not after that moment
earlier today, when Shepard had realized they knew about the communication between her and the
T’Soni maiden and assumed the worst, made it clear exactly how tenuous was the trust. Second,
while it was one thing to check if Shepard knew anything new, such as the sound manipulation
technique, it was another thing entirely to essentially admit that she couldn’t actually perform a
known biotic technique as well as Amanda. No, thought Tela with a small smirk, fully aware that
she was being both speciesist and ageist right now in her thoughts, she would first make the attempt
to further develop the coherence of her barriers on her own. It was bad enough that, thanks to
Cerberus using the techniques researched by the Republics, Shepard was now almost on par with
M’Tara and she in terms of raw biotic power and likely by far the strongest human biotic, but being
better than she, an asari Commando and Spectre, at creating barriers - no matter the reason behind it -
no, that just would not do at all. And…Vasir frowned at even contemplating the possibility, if for
some reason that failed, such as might be the case if the Protheans were utilizing an unfamiliar
underlying biotic technique to form their barriers, then perhaps she would be familiar enough with
Shepard by then to make the request as a friend and not as a higher ranking Spectre.

“I’m ready,” Shepard’s declaration refocused Vasir’s attention on what was going on around her.
The matron dipped her head in acknowledgment and tapped on the hepatic screen of her omni-
bracelet to shift the drone’s mode from stand-by to training. The drone hovered nearby for a
moment, then maneuvered itself on its jets to a position where any ricocheting ammunition would not
threaten the onlooking asari. As the drone repositioned itself, Shepard shifted position to keep facing it. Finally, it oriented itself upon the human and the indicator light on its front panel switched from green to amber to indicate that it was ready to start the training cycle Tela had programmed into it, and then finally to red as it began its firing pattern. Tela had programmed in a reactive program, whenever the drone registered returning fire for at least ten seconds, which in this case was its own reflected fire, the drone ceasefire and reposition itself at least a meter away from its former firing position before firing again. That way Shepard would have plenty of time to get the shape of the shield correct in between the drone repositioning itself to another location.

Because of the drone’s repositioning, the three of them were now standing off to the side of Shepard as the drone fired at her. From this angle Tela couldn’t really tell much about how Shepard was altering her reflective shield, she would pull off the footage from the drone’s camera afterward and examine it when she had some free time later. Instead, she focused more on Amanda’s facial expression which was one of intent concentration. Even with the signs of her reconstruction still evident in the unhealed jagged edges of graphed skin, Shepard was compelling, the underlying fine bone structure and full lips spoke of her beauty, but most of all it was her presence that drew the eye. Intelligence, resilience, competence after just two days Vasir understood why the Systems Alliance had put forward this human above all other’s as a Spectre candidate. The matron’s only concern was that perhaps Shepard’s moral code was a bit too uncompromising for some of the situations Spectres found themselves having to resolve in a way that didn’t disrupt the Galactic peace. Truth, honor and integrity were something to strive for…but not if they came at the price of millions of innocents dying because holding onto them too strictly incited a war. Was Shepard capable of sensing those subtle currents in what was often a chaotic time limited situation? The matron had found that most Spectre candidates could pick the right choice when the possible consequences were clearly laid out before them. However, the consequences of a choice were seldom clearly laid out before you. No, you had to be able to determine the possible consequences, discern which were likely, and then judge between them all on your own - and you often did not have very much time to do it.

A flashing on the haptic display of Tela’s omni-tool pulled her attention away from the human and her thoughts. She glanced down at it, then back up to focus on the drone. Its shield barriers were flickering, Shepard had successfully altered her biotic shield to reflect its weapon’s fire back at it. Tela glanced back down at her omni-bracelet’s haptic display, considering the data it was presenting to her. As the drone ceased fire and re-positioned itself the matron quickly created a custom formula to display the amount of incoming fire as a percentage of the drone’s ammunition usage. In other words, to what extent Shepard was concentrating the reflective fire back at its origin instead of scattering it.

The matron glanced over as Councilor Tevos leaned over toward her and quietly asked, “Tela, if you would share the drone’s tactical data?”

“Certainly Councilor,” nodded Vasir as she tapped in a few commands to forward the requested information over to the Matriarch’s omni-bracelet.

When Tela refocused on Shepard she noticed that the human hadn’t bothered to move, which was not a surprise since the drone had only shifted to the left by a meter. This time it took only a few seconds for Shepard to alter her reflective shield so that the drone’s shield was once again flickering with the return impacts. Vasir looked down at the haptic display, “Seventy percent of the ammunition it’s expending is being reflected back to it not bad at all,” the matron reported, “especially given its size.” Tela’s lips quirked as Shepard quickly glanced over at her with a frown before returning her attention to the drone. The nais wasn’t really surprised that the human wasn’t satisfied with seventy-five percent. Vasir looked down at the display again and, noticing that the percentage numbers were beginning to increase, quickly locked the drone in place so it wouldn’t
reposition after ten seconds.

Councilor Tevos called a halt to the training ten minutes later due to the upcoming meeting with Councilor Anderson. “Impressive reflection Spectre Shepard,” the Matriarch praised as she examined the tactical data from the drone on her omni-bracelet. “Your barrier absorbed only eight percent of the ammunition’s velocity, slightly less than a shallow angle ricochet.”

Shepard looked surprised at the Councilor’s comment, then thoughtful, “Good to know, Thalion’s memories include a few times when he was able to even the odds when outnumbered solely by reflecting incoming fire back at the attackers.” The human glanced down at her omni-bracelet and frowned, “We are scheduled to meet with Councilor Anderson in twenty minutes?”

“Yes,” the Asari Councilor responded, “there is a walkway that connects the Embassy with the Council Tower. The walk is not long, but we should leave soon in order to meet with him on time.”

That was a very clear hint and the three Spectres made their way over to where they had left their jackets and hoods. M’Tara waited until they were putting on their jackets to inquire, “So…” the lavender eyed nais asked quietly, “what did Thalion say?”

Shepard shrugged on her jacket, then glanced up at the taller asari with a carefully composed expression. “Witness a Draghir’s skill, you who are not Prothean,” she responded just as quietly as she began fastening the jacket’s buckles. Both Tela and Alena gave the human a dubious look at that answer. “Etelēa does translate as one who is not Prothean,” Shepard asserted, but neither matron missed the slight hint of defensive evasiveness in her tone.

“She’s right…” Alena drawled unconvinced, “and the way he meant it?”

Shepard flushed, then huffed out a breath before finally responding very quietly, “Primitives.” The human sighed with an unhappy frown, “As much as I like the individual Protheans I’ve come to know from the Cipher, we really are lucky that the Prothean Empire isn’t around anymore.” she commented with quiet grimness as she finished buckling her jacket and draped the blue hood over her head. Alena and Tela shared a concerned look as Shepard turned away and started back toward where Councilor Tevos and her four Commando guards were waiting for them.

Alena shook her head with an expression of dismay, “And to think, we were always taught to revere them for uniting the Galaxy and building the Citadel and mass relays. Now we find out they were not only intolerant of any culture but their own, but also didn’t have any problems with genocide if your race wouldn’t or couldn’t assimilate into theirs.”

Tela inclined her head in silent disquieted agreement as they turned to follow after Shepard. Alena was right, most Asari believed that the Protheans had been similar to their own race. Only where the Asari were still striving to unite the races of the Galaxy through peaceful persuasion, the Protheans had actually succeeded at uniting them. Re-creating a galactic government such as that which the Prothean Empire had achieved was commonly, if not explicitly stated, held to be a goal of the Republics - the ultimate political and civil expression of Siari unity. Now it seemed as if not only had that assumption been terribly incorrect, but that the Citadel and mass relays had not been left behind from any altruistic motive at all. If Shepard was right, then the Citadel was actually a hidden snare, meant only to ensure that each cycle used it as it’s centralized seat of Galactic government, enabling the Reapers alpha strike to destroy any centralized government and provide all the information they needed to track down every existing population center.

“Spectres please walk with me,” the Councilor beckoned with a graceful motion of her hand as they
exited the practice arena. As the Councilor’s guards shifted to make room for them next to Tevos, Vasir, M’Tara and Shepard moved forward from where they had been following along behind the quintet. “Spectre Shepard, how strong would you judge Prothean biotics to be compared to what you know of Humans and Asari? Reviewing the techniques you spoke of yesterday there seems to be a strong emphasis on biotic energy conservation and techniques for maximizing biotic energy efficiency.” With a sideways amused glance at each other Alena and Tela shifted positions so that Amanda, who had been following along behind them in order of seniority, could walk beside Tevos. Obviously, the intent of the Councilors request was to ask Shepard questions about the Protheans.

“I’m not certain?” Shepard responded as she moved up, and a moment later Vasir felt the human’s aura shift and change as she accessed the Cipher memories. That had to be unsettling to the Matriarch’s Commandos, Tela mused, feeling the human’s aura shift like that…how had Alena so descriptively put it? Oh yes, like a school of xayea in open waters.

Shepard’s head tilted to one side, “I believe you may be right Councilor,” she said in a bemused tone after a moment. “They may have actually been on par with a mid to high range human biotic rather than a mid to high range asari in terms of raw biotic power. In terms of biotic effectiveness though, I’d say they were actually comparable to an asari. There is a very strong emphasis on perfecting techniques in all the memories I have found so far, and their amplifier technology was more advanced than what we have currently.”

“More advanced how?” queried Tevos.

“Answering that will require two pieces of background information,” Shepard responded, “the first is that Protheans, like the Asari, evolved on an eezo rich world and were natural biotics. The second is that, also like the Asari, they developed a full body neural net which allowed them fine control over the dark energy fields produced by their eezo nodules.” Tela was surprised at this bit of information, yesterday Shepard had mentioned that the Protheans were all biotics like the Asari, but hadn’t mentioned they also had similar neural nets linking their eezo nodes. “I’m only aware of that though,” Shepard continued, “because the memories cover the fact that the biotic amplifier implantation surgery for Protheans involved embedding a secondary neural net of synthetic fibers next to their natural one and that for non-Protheans they created a neural net for them. If you were military or some type of governmental agent, they added in a micro-amplifier for each eezo node to maximize the dark energy field you could produce.”

“That is quite interesting,” Councilor Tevos responded, “is that knowledge from Dragahîr Thalion Elendel’s memories?”

“No, Councilor, it’s from the memories of Elder Instructor Lindariel Ealoeth,” Shepard replied. “She tutored non-Prothean civil service recruits in the basic techniques they would need to interact with and operate the Empire’s computer systems and equipment.” Amanda paused for a moment then continued with a slight shift of topic, “I’m hopeful that somewhere in the Cipher there is more information about their implants. I’m giving myself reaction headaches from trying to replicate some of the more complex techniques, but I suspect that one of their non-Prothean amplifiers would neatly solve that issue.”

“Indeed,” Tevos didn’t sound quite so enthusiastic about the idea, “what techniques in specific are you referring to?”

Shepard’s head swung Tevos’ way for a second at the question, more than likely because of the Matriarch’s tone thought Tela. “Protheans, like Asari, were capable of shifting their aura so they
could utilize their biotics with one another,” Shepard responded after a moment, “I managed it for a second yesterday, but that left me with a bad reaction headache. Breaking the glass out on Purgatory station also left me with a reaction headache.”

They were approaching the end of the long hallway, the doorway in front of them lead into the Embassy proper. Tevos stopped a short distance from it, bringing their group to a halt. The Matriarch turned toward Shepard, “I agree that a greater understanding of their amplifier technology would be advantageous to not only you but also all other biotics. However, I must stress again that you must be mindful of your meditations and take these explorations slowly and cautiously less you find yourself in deep waters and very dangerous currents. Do not risk the stability of your mind by recklessly rushing forward without due consideration of the dangers for there is no place to retreat to within it.”

Tevos did not say anything further, but instead signaled for the Commando in the lead to open the double doors. On the other side the sound of conversations greeted them and further up the hallway asari in various styles of business wear wandered about with either data pads or papers in their hands. This pretty much signaled the end of the Councilor’s questions for Shepard Tela knew, as they would not have any real privacy until they stepped into Councilor Anderson’s office in the Council Tower.
Part 1: Chapter 24::13 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 12

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The Mass Effect universe is the property of Bioware/Electronic Arts. No infringement of these copyrights is intended as this is a not for profit fan fiction work.

Rewrite Notes: Still inspired by the Beyonce song “Save the Hero,” from the album I am…Sasha Fierce.

Author’s Notes: Finally! All the setup and backstory is now done for part 1 and we are ready to begin part 2 of the story.

Revision History: 3/10/2019

13 Days Post-Awakening: Citadel Part 12

“Shepard,” Anderson’s smile was warm as Amanda followed Councilor Tevos’ graceful form into his office. His dark eyes studied her keenly as Spectres Vasir and M’Tara followed along behind her into the room while Tevos’ four Commando guards took up positions outside the door. “Glad to see your looking like you got a good night’s sleep,” he commented, then raised one hand and gestured toward his face. “It looks like it did you good, you seem to have done some healing overnight.”

So maybe it hadn’t just been her imagination this morning when she forced herself to look into the mirror, thought Shepard. “Consort Sha’ira gave me very comfortable accommodations,” she replied mildly. Though it was more Sha’ira’s comforting presence last night that ensured her sleep than anything else after talking with Liara, but she was hardly going to mention that in this setting.

“She’s scheduled for another treatment after lunch with Dr. T’Rani,” Alena spoke up unexpectedly.

“Treatment?” Shepard echoed with a frown of confusion as she looked over at her fellow Spectre, “what treatment?”

“While you were sedated Dr. T’Rani treated your grafted skin with some special dermal regenerator,” responded Vasir. The matron gave her a sardonic look, “You did notice this morning that the edges of your skin grafts were no longer irritated?”

Shepard scowled at her in return, catching the mirror reference, but that only seemed to amuse Tela even more. “Yes, I did notice the redness was gone this morning.” She reached up to briefly touch her cheek with her fingertips, “I just didn’t know that the doctor had done something to help it.”

“That is welcome news,” Councilor Tevos said drawing everyone’s attention to her, “though perhaps we should move forward with the purpose of this meeting so that we can ensure you have enough time to meet with Dr. T’Rani and receive another treatment before you have to depart the Citadel.”

“True, we are on tight scheduling today to get you out of here in time,” Anderson agreed with a nod as he motioned with his hand toward the other side of his office where five chairs had been arranged in a neat semi-circle. He indicated one of the chairs to the Matriarch and once the elder nais was seated took the chair next to her. Shepard took the middle of the three chairs left as it was across from him, which left two empty chairs on either side of her for her fellow Spectres.
“Yesterday, you mentioned that you wished to recruit Dr. Mordin Solus from Omega Station to develop a countermeasure to the paralytic used by the Collector swarm,” began Councilor Tevos with a questioning look.

Shepard nodded, “As well as mercenary commander known as Archangel who may be working for Warlord T’Loak. He is supposed to be an extremely good sniper and small unit tactician.” She was hoping this Archangel would work out and he would be able to take on the role of team lead for the second mission team, it would give her more deployment flexibility when it came to team compositions. If she could get Miranda to accept the idea without seeing it as some type of slight, she would like to see how the Cerberus Operative functioned as a space-side mission coordinator working with EDI to feed them intelligence. That would give them someone whose sole focus was on prioritizing and feeding the combat teams intelligence and not trying to split the duty with watching their own backs on the ground.

Tevos’ brow creased in a minute thoughtful frown. After a moment’s thought she shook her head, “That name is not familiar to me, you will have to inquire on Omega Station once you arrive. As for Dr. Mordin Solus, I was able to contact Warlord T’Loak last night,” the Matriarch continued, “and successfully negotiated terms for your ship to approach Omega Station. For now, Warlord T’Loak will only permit you to board the station,” stated Tevos, “but no one else from your crew. And, as the Warlord is currently involved with adjudicating a dispute on Esan, you will be met by her daughter Huntress Liselle T’Loak. She will then escort you to meet with Dr. Solus at his clinic to make your offer to him.” Tevos paused for a moment before offering, “If he is not interested in joining you, I would advise that you turn over all the current information you have on the Collectors to him. He may still be persuaded to develop a countermeasure for you even if he is unwilling to accompany you on-board your ship.”

Shepard nodded thoughtfully, “That sounds quite reasonable.” There was another issue she was seeing here though, and this had the possibility of being a fairly troublesome one. “Will my crew be able to get off the ship on any League world?”

The Matriarch made a gesture with her hands, “I am unsure,” the elder nais admitted, “the League worlds are taking what happened on Trident very seriously and your crew are admittedly members of Cerberus.”

“You might as well schedule in the time for leave and resupply on independent worlds like New Canton and Horizon,” Anderson spoke up as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms across his chest. “Probably best to simply assume that they’re not going to be allowed to be allowed to leave the ship, and if they do then they’re going to be searched and watched very closely.”

Shepard gave a resigned sounding sigh, “Probably for the best to be honest, there are only a few of them that have the discipline to keep up the illusion that they are Asari.” She shook her head, “The colonists that make up the crew are enthusiastic, but are as green as new Spring grass. I can see them thinking a club corner is dark enough for them to take off their helmets for food and a few drinks.”

She frowned, “Simplest thing then will be for me to just use a shuttle everywhere so it doesn’t look so odd that I’m the only one going ashore, but will the ship openly be kept under guard? If so, that’s going to bring its own kind of unwelcome attention.”

“I understand your concerns about operational secrecy Spectre Shepard,” Councilor Tevos responded using what Shepard had come to think of as her patented ‘Reasonable ‘TM’ tone, “but you also have to understand the concerns of the Warlords.” Shepard’s frown deepened, but she remained silent waiting for Tevos to continue with her explanation. “The biotic suppression drugs Cerberus used on their captives have left them with long term damage to their nervous systems. Their ability to control their biotics has been compromised, and several of them can no longer form a stable
mass effect field. All the former captives suffer from these debilitating effects. Specific to the former
asari captives however, is the fact that the damage to their nervous system affects their ability to
safely meld with anyone, even other asari. The nervous system damage means they are unable to
have any children. There is some hope that the damage the drug has done can be reversed in time,
but that is far from certain.”

Shepard was horrified, and also embarrassed that she had been so focused on how the Trident
incident affected her mission that she hadn’t really thought about the health-related side-effects the
victims might have suffered from their exposure to the drug. “I’m sorry Councilor, I hadn’t thought
through the ramifications of what happened to the asari captives. I do hope that something can be
done for them.”

“We have not publicized it.” Councilor Tevos responded in a softer tone, “but I’m sure you
understand now why the League and Republics are taking this development very seriously.”

“I do indeed Councilor,” Shepard sighed in resignation, with that not so little piece of additional
information she didn’t see the situation changing anytime soon - or at least not any timeframe a
human would consider soon.

Tevos settled back in her seat with a troubled expression, “I will contact Huntress T’Loak and
emphasize to her the absolute necessity of keeping your identity and the identity of your crew a
secret. I do understand your concerns about being ambushed by Hegemony aligned pirates and
slavers, and acknowledge that it is just as reasonable and grave of a threat as their concern of your
crew releasing a bio-agent.”

Shepard’s brows knitted, “The drug lends itself to that?”

The Matriarch inclined her head, “It does, the Republics have already determined that it would be
effective as an aerosol agent though standard filters in any hazard level one rated armor would
protect against it.”

“So, as a weapon of terror against your civilians,” Shepard scowled at the thought. “With any luck,”
she offered after a moment, “we will not only deny Cerberus the Collector tech they want, but also
get some information that will allow us to track the Illusive Man down and take out their central
command and control. When I asked for information about Cerberus EDI said that each project was
its own compartmentalized cell, so they will be extremely difficult to wipe out completely. However,
one we take out their centralized control with any luck the cells will have no way of contacting each
other or continuing to get funding, personnel or supplies.”

“That would be a desirable outcome,” Anderson agreed, “they would probably still cause problems,
but they would be disorganized and uncoordinated.”

Shepard smiled coldly as she finished for him, “And disorganized and uncoordinated enemies are
easier to exploit, mislead and ultimately take down.”

Some small noise made her glance over at Spectre M’Tara who was seated to her left. “Surely this
Illusive Man expects this?” Alena said as Shepard met her gaze, “he seems intelligent and not the
type to blindly trust anyone much less someone with a motive to betray him. And this,” the tall nais
indicated their grouping with a circular motion of her finger, “should only make him more suspicious
of your true motives and ours.”

“I’m sure,” Shepard agreed with her, “we’re circling each other with our pleasant faces on
pretending to want to work with one another, but we both have knives hidden behind our backs.
He’s hoping I’ll be focused enough on the Collectors and missing colonists like the survivor of
Mindoir that I am,” Shepard’s expression tightened a moment at that, “that I won’t notice it until it’s too late. I’m hoping to keep persuading him I’m actually wearing those blinders and haven’t noticed his knife, much less having one of my own. It will just be a matter of who strikes first and whose put in place the best counters to offset the inevitable betrayal.”

Alena’s expression grew puzzled, “Most of that accurately translated, but blinders doesn’t seem to make that much sense context wise.”

Shepard thought about the long-winded explanation which would involve horses and racing, but finally just settled for, “In this case it simply means he thinks I will focus solely on the plight of the colonists and the possible link the Collectors have to the Reapers instead of seeing the whole picture. Otherwise you need to lookup horses and horse racing to get the exact metaphor.”

She got a bemused look in return, but M’Tara didn’t ask for any further explanation of the term. Instead the asari Spectre continued her original train of thought, “Surely he will realize that the greatest weakness of his plan is where he has to go through the Omega relay to actually get access to the Collector’s technology. If he suspects anything, then that is where he will expect for us to lay an ambush for him. As for you,” Alena’s lavender eyes focused in on Shepard. “If you are correct that he just wants you to find a way through the Omega 4 relay, then right after you do will be when you are in the greatest danger. And it is also when you will be completely separated from any possibility of assistance.”

Amanda stared back at the tall nais for a moment before replying, “Depending on what’s on the other side, then yes you are correct; which is why I need to determine who is and is not an actual Cerberus agent so I can make preparations for that time.” Alena did not look pleased with that, but there was no other reassurance Shepard could honestly offer her. Of course, it was risky, but the mission still needed to be done. “As for the other,” Shepard frowned, she knew Alena was right, TIM had plans within plans and would suspect the same of her. So, the question was how to throw him off, at least just enough to make him uncertain of what she was planning for a while longer. “What about if he thinks you’re just interested in trying to find Cerberus links?” she offered up a possibility.

Alena frowned thoughtfully as the tall nais considered it and while she did Tela asked, “As if we aren’t really interested in the Collectors or any possible Reaper connection and are only supporting you because we think we can use you to find more Cerberus links for us to pursue?”

Shepard spread her hands wide as she turned to face Vasir on her other side. “It has the advantage of being true,” she pointed out, “and you might actually find something worth pursuing. All we really can hope for is to muddy the waters enough so he can’t decide for certain what we intend to do.”

Anderson nodded slowly, “No matter what he’s going to be suspicious that our support of you, which means that the only alternative is for us to appear to give you no support at all. That however, will only leave us blind as to when we need to send ships to keep him from accessing the Omega relay. No,” he shook his grizzled head in resolve, “the only realistic thing we can do is to prepare as best we can for whatever countermeasures he takes to try and catch us off guard.”

“Pretty much,” Shepard agreed with him. “We cannot let Cerberus get their hands on the Collectors technology and we need to know if there is a third-party,” she held up her hands in a warding manner, “no matter what we chose to call them, behind the attacks on Human colonies. That means I just have to deal with a certain amount of risk in this mission.” Shepard knew fully well it was the Reapers behind the Collectors. Now that the connection between the Protheans and Collectors had been made in her mind, Amanda realized the bizarre images of Prothean bodies being implanted with wires and electronics must have been meant to convey a warning about the Reaper’s final intent for their race.
Silence followed her declaration, finally Councilor Tevos spoke, “If there is nothing else, we should move onto the topic of upgrading your ship.”

It took them much less time to discuss this topic as what was needed was fairly straightforward. The STG and RIS together would run the operation, installing the Silaris armor, oscillating barriers, and Thanix cannon for a very reasonable price which covered the cost of materials and time. During the installation process, while they had the ship stripped down to its infrastructure during the installation of the new armor, both intelligence services would scan for any undocumented systems that were not on the ship specifications provided to engineers Daniels and Donnelly. They would then investigate these systems and remove them if they were not essential to the functioning of the ship. If the system was essential, then they would document them and update the ship specs for the engineers. With any luck, if there was some type of mechanical or electronic failsafe that would allow someone to disable the ship remotely or render its crew helpless, then they would find and remove it. At the end of the discussion about the ship upgrades, Tevos gave Shepard a set of company names and numbers to memorize. She was to contact them whenever she was able to get to Illium and had time for the ship to go into drydock to get the upgrades done.

“Alright, moving onto the topic of your Alliance status,” Anderson took the lead for the next conversational bullet point, and it was fairly obvious to Shepard that they were following along with a pre-set list of subjects they wanted to cover. “As required by the statutes that cover Citadel Special Reconnaissance and Tactics Agents, I have submitted your petition to be removed from active and reserve status from the Systems Alliance Marine Corps for transfer over to the sole authority of the Citadel Council.”

He leaned back in his chair with an aggravated sigh, “As you might imagine,” he said to Shepard, “they were rather surprised that the paperwork was even submitted to them given that your supposed to be deceased. It’s going to take a bit for my office to get this worked out. First, we have to get Personnel to accept the Citadel’s medical workup verifying that you are indeed Lt. Commander Amanda Shepard. Once that is done, it should just be a paperwork drill to get them to change your status from deceased to living. After that it may be a bit of a fight to get you released from your military service obligations, especially as you are an officer instead of enlisted, but it will get done.”

Councilor Tevos broke in, “The Council was assured at the time by Ambassador Udina that there would be no issues with the Alliance military releasing her from her service requirements to become a member of Special Tactics and Reconnaissance.” The Matriarch’s terse tone clearly hinted at her displeasure with this bit of information.

“It would have been much easier to do then,” Anderson grumbled, “now it’s a bit more difficult.”

Shepard snorted at his answer, “Before I died you mean and all my records got marked with killed in action, known deceased instead of missing or assumed to be dead. Personnel is going to stonewall you partially because they don’t have a checkbox that says was dead but got better,” she quipped to him. In her peripheral vision, she caught sight of Tela on one side and Alena on the other both regarding her with raised brows at her flippancy. It was flippant, but it was also a way to divert the Asari Councilor’s ire away from Anderson who didn’t deserve it.

Anderson shook his head at her as he gave her a sternly reproving look which was undermined by a betraying twitch of his lips. Shepard had heard him complain enough about Personnel and their inability to think outside their forms in the past, so it was hard to take his rebuke very seriously. “It’s not as if we are giving the Alliance that much detail,” he finally responded, “so it’s going to take a bit of political lean to get them to change your status without getting any of their questions answered to their satisfaction.”
“Let me know if you need any assistance David,” Tevos offered, “the rest of the Council members want to get this issue settled as quickly as possible.”

“It would help if I could tell them that Shepard was in a coma for the past two years instead of on a mission that they were not informed of while she was still an officer of the Systems Alliance Marine Corps,” sighed Anderson.

Shepard stared at him incredulously, “They think I faked my death to go undercover?”

“I’m not sure to be honest,” Anderson admitted, “but they definitely aren’t pleased with your unexplained return and the Council’s reluctance to make any comment on where you have been during the intervening time.”

“Hmm,” Shepard frowned at the floor, though that was simply because it was the direction she happened to be looking as she considered the problem, “so they need a reasonable sounding explanation. One that doesn’t step on their toes since I was still supposed to be nominally reporting to them.” She raised her eyes to Anderson, “This is probably as good a time as any to have this discussion because I’ve been wondering myself what am I supposed to say if anyone asks about where I’ve been the last two years and why the Alliance said that I was dead and buried an empty casket.”

Anderson made a noise midway between a sigh and groan as he reached up and rubbed at his forehead, but didn’t immediately offer any suggestions. Shepard glanced over at Councilor Tevos who had her attention focused on Anderson and seemed to be content to wait for him to come up with something. Amanda wasn’t as inclined, her opinion about the Alliance hiding that the Collectors were behind the colony attacks hadn’t changed from yesterday. It was going to come back and bite the Alliance in the ass when the general public finally found out the truth. She had been thinking about this a bit this morning and had come up with an idea of her own that she would prefer to be the ‘official’ story over some strange convoluted and completely untrue one. “What about I was found on Alchera and held in medical stasis for over a year by a third party as they worked out how to save my life rather than have me die a few minutes after they took me out of stasis?”

“A third party?” Anderson frowned uncertainly, not looking happy at that terminology.

“The Warlords are going to all know that I’m working with Cerberus,” Shepard pointed out, “it’s only a matter of time before that news spreads so we might as well not get caught out in an obvious lie just a month or two down the road. Third party is at once non-committal and defensible when that time comes along.” Anderson’s expression had changed from frowning to thoughtful so she continued, “It has the advantage of being close to the truth. It clears the Council of any intentional deception about my death, as you honestly didn’t know that I had been found and was in medical stasis all this time. And it explains why haven’t shown up before now.” She gestured toward her face, “I couldn’t as I’ve been unconscious until just recently with all the surgeries and healing.”

“You wish to make a public announcement of your return to active service?” Councilor Tevos questioned, her tone making it clear the elder nais was not exactly enthusiastic with the idea.

Shepard hadn’t actually considered that, she pursed her lips as she thought about it then slowly shook her head. “No, given the Cerberus connection and my current mission it’s probably best that I try and keep as low a profile as possible for as long as possible.” Tevos dipped her head in acknowledgment, and Shepard could tell that the Matriarch agreed with her assessment.

“Alright,” Anderson nodded, “I believe that could work, they’ll want to know who the third party is however.”
“You may tell them that the Council is withholding that information at this time due as it would compromise Spectre Shepard’s current mission,” Tevos responded coolly.

One of Anderson’s eyebrows rose, but he looked more amused than offended by the Asari Councilor’s reply. “Well at least that will answer some of their questions,” he shifted his gaze to Shepard, “and most importantly it refutes any idea they may have that you’ve actually been on a long-term undercover mission for the Council.”

“David,” Tevos’ serious tone drew everyone’s attention to the elder nais, “you must make your military understand that the Council as well as the Asari Republics are quite serious about getting Spectre Shepard’s status resolved within the desired timeframe. Your government through Ambassador Udina made certain assurances to me at the time in order to gain my cooperation with her sponsorship. If I were to determine that the Systems Alliance never intended to fulfill those assurances, there will be severe repercussions which will include the reconsideration of certain material’s contracts currently under bid with the Asari Republics.”

Shepard glanced back and forth uncertainly between the two Councilors, uncertain why they were discussing this right now, and why Tevos was pushing so hard for her status to be resolved within the next six or so weeks. To be honest, Shepard felt rather conflicted about the fact that she had to choose between continuing her service in the Alliance military and keeping her status as a Council Spectre. As she had assured Councilor Spartacus yesterday, she understood why the Council insisted that their Spectres only answer to one authority, but that didn’t mean she had to like it. So much of her vision of herself, of who she was as a person, included the image of herself in the distinctive dress uniform of the Systems Alliance Marine Officer and her training and status as one of the few N7 Special Operations officers that turning away from it was a difficult thing to contemplate. She knew in one sense she would always be a Marine whether or not she was still an official part of the Corps. After all, the saying ‘Once a Marine, Always a Marine’ existed for a very good reason, the Corps was through in its indoctrination or ‘character conditioning’ as they called it. The idea though of surrendering her commission, of leaving the Alliance military to swear sole allegiance to a Council that she didn’t fully trust…

Anderson seemed rocked back by the Matriarch’s threat, his amused expression turning quite serious. Whatever these ‘material’ contracts were, Shepard realized, they must be very important to Alliance. “I understand,” he replied after a moment, “I will pass that information along to them and make sure they have a clear understanding of your displeasure over the possibility of a delay.”

It wasn’t as if she had any real choice Shepard mused as she continued silently observe the interaction between the two Councilors. The treatment she had received two years ago from the Alliance military after having been made a Spectre had been disillusioning and eye-opening about the underhanded politics going on in the Alliance military’s upper-ranks. If she renounced her Spectre status to stay with the Alliance military, she risked losing not only the support of Councilor Anderson and Admiral Hackett, but also angering those in the Alliance government who had fought so hard for the Council to offer the opportunity for her to become one. Combine that with the fact that she had made several enemies amongst the Terra Firma supporting senior-ranked military officers when she hadn’t kowtowed to Udina… She breathed out an inaudible sigh, no there was no real choice here for her. She needed to stop the Collectors, thwart the Illusive Man’s plans, find solid proof of the existence of the Reapers and to have any hope of doing that she needed to keep her Spectre status. Shepard focused her attention back on the two Councilors and noticed they seemed to be done with their discussion. She did have one question concerning what Anderson had just said, “Sponsorship?”

Anderson turned back toward her, “Only members of the Council can sponsor a Spectre applicant,” he explained, “and since we weren’t a member at that time Councilor Tevos agreed to be your
official sponsor. This was all worked out much earlier, as part of the agreements reached for us to turn over the beacon on Eden Prime to the Council instead of retaining our primary research rights to it.”

Shepard glanced in dismay between the two Councilors, then focused on the asari, “I apologize Councilor Tevos, I did not realize…” she paused as Tevos waved her silent with a graceful motion of her hand.

Tevos said, “At the time we had our reasons for coordinating our contact with you through Ambassador Udina. After considering everything you said yesterday however, it is clear that he exploited the situation and purposefully withheld information from you to exert undue influence over your actions. Your refusal to let him speaks well of you and I suspect you are correct that he meant to sabotage your Spectre status in order to replace you with another more willing to put his interests above our own. Cerberus’ actions on Trident have made them a clear enemy of the Republics, they cannot be allowed access to the Collector’s technology. Whatever issues the Alliance has with releasing you from your military service obligations as agreed upon two years ago needs to be quickly resolved and your Spectre status confirmed, so that you may focus on your mission.”

“Understood Councilor,” Shepard gravely responded, “I’ll do everything I can to make sure Cerberus doesn’t get their hands on it.”

The Matriarch’s grey eyes stared with a keen, penetrative gaze into Shepard’s lighter grey ones for several seconds as the Asari Councilor weighted her sincerity. “I believe you will,” Tevos finally said, then turned her attention back to Councilor Anderson. “The Republics Intelligence Service has already determined that Cerberus appears to have far more resources and support than either the STG or RIS had estimated in the past. Enough so that they are highly suspicious that they may actually be getting substantial support from within the Alliance itself.”

Shepard straightened in her seat with alarm, that was a clear warning shot across the bow if she ever heard one. Crap, the last thing the Alliance needed right now was to have the Asari Republics signal a withdrawal of support, that would leave the Alliance without their main ally when the Reapers arrived from dark space. In the nearer term, it might have a devastating effect on the Alliance’s economy if it translated into lost commerce with the Republics, embolden some of the Terminus System slavers to carry out raids on their outlying colonies, and have a chilling effect on the relationship of the Alliance with the League of the Terminus. Terra Firma constantly decried that the Republics was attempting to culturally dominate humanity with its trading policies, which was not exactly untrue, but the culture war also swung in the opposite direction because the Asari were fascinated with Human entertainments like movies, games and books. No, Shepard suspected that any attempts at cultural domination were second to ensuring just this situation - that the Alliance’s economy was bound up just precisely enough with the Republics that the Asari could use the threat of embargoes to crush the Alliance’s economy, but not greatly depress their own in return if the Alliance attempted to retaliate in kind.

Anderson’s dark eyes narrowed on the asari Councilor as a deep frown curled down his lips at the implied threat. “That was as much of an unwelcome surprise to me as it was to you, Tevos,” he refuted in a stern tone, “and you can be assured that we will be looking into any evidence that turns up linking Cerberus to anyone in the Alliance - be they corporate, government or military.”

“I do not doubt you David,” Tevos replied after a moment and Shepard found it interesting that the elder nais sounded slightly conciliatory toward him.

Listening to the tense conversation between the two Councilors, Shepard realized that the Republics needed some specific targets to focus their ire on right now rather than just the Alliance in general.
Fortunately, she happened to have an idea of how to get at least a start on that list. “We should get some leads when I take the ship into dry-dock on Illium,” Shepard said, drawing both Councilor’s attention to her, “Cerberus built it so looking at the component parts should provide manufacturers and parts numbers to investigate. From there, you just need to determine who ordered them and start following the money trail back to Cerberus or at least their direct agents. Also, investigating the question of exactly how Cerberus got a hold of the specifications for the original Normandy might lead to more hints about their activities.”

Vasir and M’Tara had been conspicuously silent for the past few minutes, so it was a bit of a surprise when Tela volunteered, “I wouldn’t mind assisting with that if I have the time after my current mission. Tracking down orders and then tracing the funding for them will hopefully lead us to the shell companies Cerberus is using as fronts to hide their activities.”

“And Jack,” Shepard paused and corrected herself, “err, Subject Zero is looking through the logs available from the ship searching for the laboratory where she was experimented upon.” She frowned, “I suspect TIM expected her to ask for access to those records however, so I wouldn’t expect to find anything other than the hollowed-out shell of the place itself, but you never know if the clean-up team missed something.”

“Perhaps I can get a copy of those records when I drop you off at your ship?” Tela said, “I’m sure we can find the location quicker than this Jack, but what are her plans for it when she finds it? Our agents will need some time to investigate an entire facility.”

“Hmm,” Shepard considered the question in light of what she knew of the volatile woman. After a few moments’ consideration, she responded, “Keep in mind that I’ve only known Jack for three days, but I’d be surprised if she didn’t want to render it permanently unusable by Cerberus.”

“You mean she’s going to want to use explosives to destroy it completely or as completely as possible,” Alena spoke up as the tall nais stretched out her long legs beside Shepard, “which will make it exceptionally difficult to get any evidence.”

From the other side of Shepard, Tela replied, “Then that means we need to find it first and investigate it as thoroughly as possible before she destroys it.” And she had willingly sat here in the middle, grochily mused Shepard as the two asari Spectres spoke literally over her head.

“What I want to know is how Cerberus got its hands on those children in the first place,” Anderson broke into the conversation.

Shepard glanced up at him with a frown, “I’ve wondered that myself, I thought the Alliance closely monitored all possible biotic births?”

“They do,” he confirmed with a scowl, “we don’t have enough biotics as it is, so how did Cerberus manage to get its hands on them without anyone raising the alarm they they’d gone missing?”

Shepard frowned as one possibility came to her mind, but it was a very horrific one.

“Then perhaps that is another question that should be investigated,” Councilor Tevos said, and Shepard looked up to see the Matriarch regarding both Anderson and she with one raised brow and a faintly repulsed expression on her face, probably wondering how in the world humans were so negligently irresponsible as to actually allow their children to be taken from them. Asari, being the family focused species that they were with their Lineages, typically sequestered themselves upon pregnancy at the Lineages primary enclave. Their daughters were born there, and typically raised there as well for at least the first decade or so of their lives. Since these compounds held the Lineage’s most powerful Matriarchs, they were also well protected by the Lineage’s Huntresses and
Commandos. The possibility of someone actually managing to successfully kidnap a child from one would be improbably low.

Shepard sighed, “I can unfortunately think of one way they could take a child without raising any red flags for the Alliance personnel keeping track of the mother.” Anderson glanced over at her with a heavy, questioning frown and she continued, “You know that most fetus’s exposed to eezo don’t survive, so it’s unfortunately not unusual for them to either be spontaneously aborted or born stillborn.” The dawning look of horror on Anderson’s face indicated that he saw where she was going with this line of thinking. “If Cerberus had people on the staff of the hospital where the mother went to give birth, then it would be possible to deceive everyone that the child didn’t survive. It would be even easier to do on one of the independent colonies which tend to have less oversight and regulations in general. Easier to make the infant disappear without someone noticing the body didn’t actually make it down to the morgue to determine the cause of death.”

“You believe Cerberus personnel would experiment on human infants?” Alena exclaimed in a disgusted tone.

Shepard glanced over to her left at the taller Spectre as she replied, “There’s evidence that the Thresher Maw attack on the colony of Akuze was not an accident and that colony included very young children. Cerberus had a research base there to collect data about the Maws, and even if they didn’t lure them there, they sure didn’t warn the colony about them. They didn’t warn the Marines sent to find out what went wrong either, and even kidnapped one of the two survivors, Corporal Chris Toombs, so they could experiment on him. I don’t really think we can put anything past them in their mad quest fulfill their idea of an improved Humanity.”

“You really don’t think much of Cerberus do you,” remarked Tela in a thoughtful tone, causing Shepard to shift attention to the asari sitting on the other side of her. “I didn’t realize you had come across any their activities before now.”

“I hadn’t until after I became a Spectre,” Shepard clarified, “then I seemed to run across their activities everywhere, and always associated with Human related atrocities. Running into Corporal Toombs, who was tracking down and killing the Cerberus scientists who experimented on him, and finding out the truth of their involvement with what happened on Akuze. Tracking down a shipment from Feros by ExoGeni, and finding out that they had sent Dragon’s Teeth to Chasca to see what happened and ended up wiping out its entire pioneer colony.” Shepard didn’t mention Listening Posts Alpha and Theta because that would mean bringing up the Rachni and she wasn’t certain whether or not Vasir and M’Tara knew about the Rachni Queen she had freed on Noveria. “Then there are the rumors that they’re involved with engineering several of the ‘accidental’ eezo exposures that have occurred over the past few decades. Add to that the entire population of Fehl Prime and possibly the earlier Collector attacks, and Cerberus may actually be almost as dangerous to Humans as the Hegemony.”

“That is an interesting observation,” Tevos commented thoughtfully, “I had not realized that so many Human deaths could be attributed to them.” The asari Matriarch turned toward her fellow Councilor, “Given this, why hasn’t the Alliance made them more of a priority?”

“Their actions on Fehl Prime really tipped the scales,” replied Anderson after a moment, “their rumored involvement with eezo exposures was just that - rumor - and easily discounted by those who wanted the group to be what they claimed they were - a group that would protect Humanity from their enemies no matter the cost. Much of everything else Shepard mentioned is classified, so very few people knew about the individual events, much less knowing enough to put it all together. Fehl Prime though,” Anderson commented, “that woke at least some people up to the fact that Cerberus’ ‘no matter the cost’ perhaps was a bit higher than they had anticipated.”
“Not all though,” Tevos immediately caught the implication.

But when she looked as if she would continue, Anderson held up one hand to stop her. “Some didn’t believe it, and I suspect some of them just didn’t want to believe that any human had actually helped the Collectors attack the colony, much less that they belonged to Cerberus.”

Tevos frowned and this time Shepard intervened, “Not enough proof to get over their internal resistance to changing their minds about Cerberus. Not that surprising, given that most of our current civilian, military and cooperate leadership were young adults when the First Contact War occurred and lived through the hysteria of that time. I’m convinced quite a few of them still firmly believe that the Hierarchy is just waiting for any excuse to go to war with us. Combine that with all the attacks on our planets that have occurred since then, and the galaxy seems like a very hostile and dangerous place to many humans - especially those who have never left Earth. It gives Cerberus fertile ground for their recruitment message that they’re the only ones taking it seriously enough and willing to actually do something against it.”

“That agrees with what I have learned from some of the humans who have come to work on the Citadel from Earth,” Alena spoke up, “it is not unusual for their family members to be very concerned about their well-being here.”

As suave and smooth as the asari Spectre was in her flirting, Shepard thought as she glanced over at the tall nais, she could just guess how M’Tara had come by her information. “Are turians in dark alleys just waiting to rip their throats out with their bare hands, still one of the warnings?” Amanda had actually had a few elderly women stop to quite earnestly warn her about that during the few times she had liberty during basic and advanced training on Earth and was required to wear her Marine dress uniform during it.

Alena turned her naturally purple-marked face toward her, raising one brow over lavender hued eyes as the asari gave her a wry, humor-filled look. “Yes, that was essentially the cold current of their fears,” the nais confirmed, “along with salarians kidnapping them to experiment upon them, and asari waiting to seduce them,” her smirk grew at the last and Shepard snorted in amusement. One out of the three then was at least correct. As funny as it was thought, the kernel of truth in it was troubling. Quite a bit of Earth’s problem was that people tended to be self-sorting. The vast majority of humans stayed on Earth, helping perpetuate the fearful stereotypes about aliens, while only the most adventurous or gain-seeking left for the colonies and discovered a more nuanced truth.

“Earth’s...” Everyone’s heads swiveled in Councilor Tevos’ direction as the Matriarch began and then imperceptibly paused as she considered what word to use next, “continuing difficulty with integrating into the galactic community has been noted in numerous intelligence reports from multiple sources. The Republics are...appreciative of the negative psychological effects that cumulative attacks by slaver forces linked to the Batarian Hegemony and then the Geth and Saren have had on the general human populace.” How diplomatically put, thought Shepard, before the asari Councilor continued, “however we are straying rather far from the topic at hand, and that is that the Republics insists that the Systems Alliance abides by the agreements they made two years ago concerning the status of Spectre Shepard.”

“I’ll ensure that point is made to Alliance officials,” Anderson firmly responded to her. Tevos stared at him for a long considering moment and then simply inclined her head in agreement with him. Shepard stifled a relieved sigh, she really didn’t want her status to be a point of contention between the Alliance and Republics. Anderson’s gaze turned her way and she straightened reflexively in her seat as he directed his next words to her. “Once the paperwork drill is done, I can begin the process of transferring over your Spectre sponsorship from the Asari Republics to the Systems Alliance…”
“That is not necessary,” Councilor Tevos smoothly broke in, “I would be pleased to retain Spectre Shepard’s sponsorship,” the Matriarch turned her gaze on Shepard, “unless she wishes the transferal to take place?”

Again, with the place she didn’t really want to be, thought Shepard as she glanced between the two Councilors. Her mind analytically assessed the pros and cons of either option as they stared at her awaiting her response. Unfortunately for Anderson, she really didn’t know how her return would be taken by the Alliance, much less her current mission. And also, her mind quietly whispered, she didn’t know how far into the Alliance Cerberus had influence that they might use to limit and control her if they had the means to do so. She looked towards Tevos as she asked, “Would transferring it away from you affect the amount of future cooperation I could expect from the League during my mission?”

A brief, impressed look crossed the Matriarch’s face before she replied, “It would, my reassurances as to your ultimate loyalty and intentions will carry more weight if I am your sponsor than they will if it transfers over to Councilor Anderson and the Alliance.”

Shepard nodded, then looked over at Anderson with an apologetic expression, “I believe we should table that until after this mission is over Sir.”

Anderson leaned back in his chair with a heavy sigh, “I understand…and even agree with the reasoning, but you should know this might cause issues down the line with the Alliance.”

“Can you just not mention the possibility to them?” Shepard asked, with equal parts humor and seriousness. “At least until this mission is complete.”

“They’re the ones who brought it up,” Anderson responded warningly, “so no. Though I will make the effort to persuade them that this is purely a political move on your part so you can more freely operate within the League.”

That was not really welcome news, Shepard frowned slightly at the realization that this communication with Anderson had occurred between the time her identity was confirmed yesterday and this morning. Was it just that the Prime Minister’s office thought Humanities first Spectre, no matter how odd the news of her return from death, must be sponsored by a human Councilor? Or did this indicate that Cerberus had influence all the way up to the Prime Minister’s office and this was an attempt to limit the amount of damage she could do to the terrorist organization now that she had at least a small amount of support from the Council?

“Very well Spectre Shepard,” Councilor Tevos replied, “you will remain under my sponsorship for at least the duration of your current mission. Along with my office,” Councilor Tevos informed Shepard, “Spectres Vasir and M’Tara will remain your primary liaisons whenever you need to act within Council space or with the League.” In other words, thought Shepard, she should contact them whenever she wanted to visit the Citadel to be her escorts. “They will provide you their contact information so that you may reach out to them at any time,” Tevos finished.

“If you can,” Spectre M’Tara followed up, “try and give us some advance warning of when you will be needing us either on the Citadel or one of the other Council worlds. Tela and I will try and arrange our schedules around yours as much as possible, but neither of us may be available on short notice.”

“Understandable,” Shepard replied easily, “you’ll have your own missions,” and Alena inclined her head in graceful agreement.

Tevos glanced down at her omni-bracelet and then over toward Anderson, “I believe that is all we
Anderson replied with a decisive shake of his head, “I have nothing else,” and looked to be about to stand up in preparation of ending the meeting.

Shepard straightened in her seat before he could rise from his chair, drawing both Councilors attention to her. “I do have one question,” she said to Anderson, “is the Alliance planning on revealing that the Collectors are the ones attacking the colonies and that Cerberus assisted them at Fehl Prime soon? That news would shake the crew’s belief that Cerberus is trying to help the colonies and make it easier for me to gain their loyalty.”

He settled back in his chair as he considered the question. After a moment he frowned as he pointed out, “It might also make your mission that much harder if you can’t easily resupply at independent human colonies.”

He was right, Shepard realized, but still, “That might be, but there may come a point where their identity as the attackers will come out and I’d rather the Alliance be ready for it than be caught by surprise.” And look like they had been doing what they had been doing, which was keeping some rather critical information from their citizens. Information which directly affected some of those citizens personal safety and the safety of their families.

The human Councilor sighed, “Trust me, I’m fully aware of the pitfalls of the Alliances decision to keep quiet about it, but ninety-seven percent of our population remains on Earth. I don’t have to tell you what that means if your right. We need those people to remain out in the colonies.”

Shepard’s lips thinned as she pressed them together in a grimace and her thoughts flitted a moment toward the horror of the beacon’s message before she forcefully drew them back. This was definitely not the time to get caught up in those images. “Yes, I understand what that means,” she responded in a grim tone. Across from her Councilor Anderson nodded his head while Councilor Tevos glanced sharply over at her with an intent expression. Out of the corner of her eyes she caught the two asari Spectres on either side of her also turn their heads to look at her. “I won’t mention it then until either the Alliance is ready to break the news or it becomes evident upon its own.”

“Good,” he responded as he rose to his feet along with Councilor Tevos and all three Spectres stood up as well. “Be careful out there Shepard,” he said to her, “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what that means if your right. We need those people to remain out in the colonies.”

“TIM?” Shepard responded and Anderson seemed to find the contraction amusing judging from the small grin that tugged on his lips at it. “No, I start looking for the angles whenever he says anything, and I’m always cautious whenever he sends us anywhere especially since Cerberus can’t seem to put together a decent mission briefing. As for the crew, don’t worry I don’t trust any of them other than Dr. Chakwas and Joker.”

He frowned at that piece of information, “I know that’s got to be stressful watching your back all the time, so whenever you can swing by here to give us mission updates and take a few hours to get away from it.”

“I’ll do my best Sir,” Shepard replied though she knew that visiting the Citadel would have to take second place to the needs of her mission. Still though, when possible it would be nice to retreat to the complete privacy of the Consort’s compound to relax. She turned toward Councilor Tevos and executed a perfectly formal bow to the asari who was her sponsor and then said in Thessian, “Councilor, if you have no further need of me?”

She was sure she caught a slight indication of pleasure in the Matriarch’s eyes before the asari
Councilor said, “No Spectre Shepard, I believe Dr. T’Rani is expecting you shortly. May the Goddess watch over you and bless your endeavors.”

“And her yours,” Shepard returned just as formally with another bow which was mirrored by both asari Spectres on either side of her before the three of them turned to exit the room.

Before they could however Tevos added, “Spectre Shepard, I expect you to be mindful and cautious of deep waters and dangerous currents.”

Shepard turned back, immediately realizing the Councilor was speaking about the Cipher memories and her intended exploration of them in search of more information about Prothean biotic amplifiers. “I will heed your wisdom Matriarch,” she responded carefully, not wanting to be boxed into admitting that she was going looking for the information no matter what warnings she received about it. She would try to be careful in how she went about the search though, she didn’t want to lose her own identity after all.

Tevos gave her a look that very clearly indicated she been nearly a good enough actress to fool the elder nais, but then waved her hand in silent permission toward the door. Shepard gave a silent sigh of relief as they exited the room, glad to have escaped without another lecture and leaving the two Councilors to apparently have an after-meeting meeting.

Unfortunately for her hope of a clean escape however, Tela stopped in the hallway to dryly advise her, “Generally, Matriarch’s expect that heeding will include following their advice, not just listening to it.” Shepard knew she would not win this conversation so she just kept her silence while meeting Vasir’s challenging gaze with as much even calmness as she could manage. Finally the other Spectre glanced down at her omni-bracelet and then said, “But we can discuss that more during our trip to meet with your ship.” Shepard couldn’t quite manage to completely quell her groan of dismay at the idea for it would take them a good three or so hours to reach the MSV Menrva. Tela looked back up at her upon hearing it and a smirk of amusement curved her lips and lit an evil seeming gleam in her brown eyes, but the matron didn’t pursue the topic any further. Instead she said, “For now though, we need to get moving if we are to meet with Dr. T’Rani on time.”

Dr. T’Rani’s office within the central Presidium Medical Center building was not very large, perhaps three meters by four meters total. “Spectre Shepard,” Dr. T’Rani rose from her chair behind her desk, a warmly welcoming smile curving her dark blue lips. “I’m pleased you could make time to meet with me before you departed the Citadel.”

Shepard laughed softly in response as the blue-complexioned asari doctor stepped around her desk, which was at the far end of the office, to come forward to meet her. The two of them shook hands and Amanda said, “The Councilors have kept me pretty busy with their debriefs, but also deemed it essential that I had time for this appointment before leaving today.”

There were two cream-colored sofas arranged across from one another toward the front of the office along with a rather large display screen hanging on the right-hand wall between them and the doctor’s desk. Dr. T’Rani motioned her toward the soft on the left as the nais sat down upon the other sofa. “I believe we just have time to go over the results of the test I took yesterday,” the doctor said, “and then another treatment with the dermal regeneration unit to speed the healing of your skin grafts. During the treatment, we’ll discuss the effects your implants are having upon your body and the nutritional requirements and caloric goals you need to meet in order to stay healthy. I’ll also be sending the same information with you as well as more specific information for your medical team on an OSD.” Shepard inhaled a breath at that, unconsciously straightening her shoulders under the perceived additional burden that was about to be placed upon her. “Your implants and your body are still adapting to one another,” Dr. T’Rani’s said, her voice taking on a reassuring tone as her keen
blue eyes noted the human’s response, “over time they will become more efficient and synchronized
to your body. If they follow the same trend as the current generation of cybernetics, then in a few
months your nutritional goals should drop by a third to a quarter.”

A third to a quarter, Shepard’s shoulders relaxed slightly at the news. That wouldn’t be so bad then,
she just had to make it through the next few months. “That’s good to know,” she responded, “I was
starting to worry that I would have to force myself to eat far, far more than I wanted for the rest of
my life. Even a drop by a quarter will help.”

Dr. T’Rani inclined her head in agreement then twisted upon the soft to wave her omni-bracelet at
the large display screen hanging on the wall next to the sofa. It activated, displaying a detailed scan
of a female body. Besides the whitish structures of bones and more ghostly outlines of organs, there
were darker spots evenly spread throughout the limbs and torso. Shepard could immediately guess
that they were her eezo nodules. “These are the results of your scans taken during your intake as a
Spectre showing your eezo nodules,” Dr. T’Rani said surprising Shepard a bit that the image was
from two years ago. The doctor waved her arm again and the image updated, “You can see the
difference in density and size of your eezo nodules now.” Shepard could indeed, the nodules were
darker and noticeably larger. “I’m sure you’ve noticed quite a bit of difference in the strength of your
biotics by now,” Shepard nodded in response and she continued, “your amplifier is clearly a
prototype, at least a generation ahead of what’s available now. I’ve already sent the specifications of
it to Citadel Intelligence to try and track down who might have had a hand in developing it.”

Shepard’s brow rose at that, “Do you think they will find anything?”

“Possibly,” the matron responded, “very advanced creations such as amplifiers and cybernetics tend
to follow a…design trend let us say. So studying your amplifier should tell them something about the
person or team that created it, or at least whose design philosophy they followed.” Amanda nodded
thoughtfully, you could really say the same thing about anything advanced enough that it required a
craftsman’s touch to create it. The creator left their signature on their creation, and someone
knowledgeable enough with the field could make a good guess at who created an item just by
examining it closely.

The asari matron next made an upward motion with her hand and the image on the screen changed
again, this time to a brain scan. “I was able to confirm for the Council that your neural pathways
have indeed altered in a way that supports your statement that drell neurochemicals were used to
stabilize your memory. I also found something else,” the nais turned away from the display to glance
over at her, “a cluster of memory neurons in a familiar location for an asari but definitely an unusual
one for a human.” Dr. T’Rani and Shepard stared silently at one another for a moment, then the nais
continued, “Which I’ve been informed I’m not to ask how that came about or mention it to anyone
else without Councilor Tevos’ authorization.” Shepard gave Dr. T’Rani a sardonic look, if Tevos
herself had already decided the doctor didn’t have a need to know the information then she was
certainly was not going to tell the doctor how those memories ended up there either.

The nais turned back to the screen, motioning at it again and changing the image back to a full body
one. Shepard immediately noticed that instead of the eezo nodes being in focus, this image seemed to
focus upon her skeletal structure. “In addition to your cybernetics and bio-synthetic replacements,”
Dr. T’Rani said, “the bones and muscles that remain have been reinforced with protective weaves to
make them stronger and more resistant to damage. This is absolutely necessary in cases where parts
of the central skeletal structure have been replaced with combat grade cybernetics. In order not to run
the risk of severely damaging the remaining bone, muscle and connecting tissue to which the
cybernetics attach, they must be reinforced so that they can withstand the stresses placed upon them
by the cybernetics themselves.” Dr. T’Rani paused for a moment and then added, “Though I must
admit the level of reinforcement, especially the titanium plating along your spine is unprecedented,
my colleagues were quite interested in the results of your scans.”

The asari doctor paused for a moment then she pulled a pen laser pointer out of her coat pocket and used it to point at the right arm of the image on the screen. “You mentioned yesterday that you already aware that your entire right arm needed replacement,” the red dot moved over to the skull, “and I’m certain that you’ve noticed that your eyes needed cybernetic replacements as well.” Now the laser dot moved to the spine and what honestly looked to Shepard like linked armor plating along the length of it, “I’ve just mentioned that your spine needed extensive replacements and then was reinforced with titanium plating.” She looked thoughtful and then added, “The plating not only protects your spine, but also protects the neural fibers that connect the implants in your torso and lower body cybernetics with your brain. It would take quite a bit of force to compromise either now, especially with the way the protective plating is linked to reinforce itself when compressed.”

Dr. T’Rani paused for a moment as she studied the image on the display screen, “I find it interesting that the reinforcement weaves woven into your natural skeletal and muscular structure as well as the skin weave used to form the base layer of your skin grafts…”

Shepard interrupted her in surprise, “Wait, what?” she lifted her hand and looked at the new skin covering it with interest, “I have weaves woven into my new skin?”

“You have a sub-dermal layer of heavy reinforced weave covering your entire body actually,” the doctor replied, “and then another finer layer woven into the dermis, and yes, that includes your skin grafts. As a result, your skin is quite more durable than it used to be, and the weave also acts as a conduit for medi-gel allowing for quicker stoppage of bleeding when injured and improved recovery rates when healing.” Dr. T’Rani allowed her a moment to digest that piece of information before adding, “It is also the latest weave prototype from Sirta Foundation and not available commercially, so I reported that up to the Citadel Intelligence as well for investigation.”

Shepard frowned, “I can’t believe that Sirta Foundation is involved with Cerberus.” Yet the weaves were prototypes… her frown depended as she forced herself to give the idea due consideration, and honestly the more she thought about it the more she could see reasons why Cerberus might have infiltrated the company. “But I wouldn’t be surprised if Cerberus has a few operatives there just to keep up with what the company is researching. That way they could put it to use before it was released to the public or use Sirta’s research as a springboard for their own.”

Dr. T’Rani looked thoughtful for a moment and then inclined her head in agreement, “That is also a possibility, I will bring it up to my contact in Intelligence.”

Shepard was relieved to hear that, she didn’t really want the Spectres going all out after Sirta Foundation without substantial proof they were involved with Cerberus. The company did really good things for the Alliance, offering genetic modifications at almost cost for any genetically linked disease and low-cost longevity modifications that brought the treatment into reach for nearly ninety-five percent of the human population. All of this of course, was financed by their sale of medi-gel to the galaxy. Even then they didn’t gouge anyone on the price, relying on volume of sale rather than per unit pricing.

“In addition to what we have already mentioned,” the doctor turned back to the display screen, “your humerus, radius and ulna bones of your left arm were replaced and both hands needed extensive reconstruction.” Shepard quietly glanced back up at the screen as Dr. T’Rani indicated each area, she hadn’t known that her hands had to be reconstructed. Apparently her armored gloves hadn’t been quite enough to protect them. “Finally moving onto your lower body, quite a bit of your pelvis required reconstruction as well as most of your right leg and the lower part of your left leg. Both feet required nearly the same amount of reconstruction as your hands.”
“What does that mean,” Shepard finally asked, “when you say they needed extensive reconstruction?”

Dr. T’Rani turned to face her, her blue eyes searching and Shepard had the feeling the doctor was attempting to evaluate her emotional state before proceeding. Amanda did her best to stay truly calm and composed for she knew her smell would betray her to the asari’s sensitive nose if she tried to only mask her feelings. Shepard knew she had done a fairly good job of doing so when the doctor launched into her explanation, “It is not unusual in free-fall accidents for the extremities to suffer from extreme blunt trauma damage.” Shepard had to suppress a wince as she realized what the doctor was saying, the body would tumble around during the landing and of course the extremities… being at the end of the arms and feet, would naturally get the worse of it. “In your case, some of the bones were actually intact enough to be kept, but almost all of the muscle and all of the skin had to be replaced.”

Shepard nodded her understanding, even as her thoughts tumbled about in freefall themselves. How much of herself was even left, how much had been replaced by implants, cybernetics and bio-synthetic replacements.

“Spectre Shepard,” Dr. T’Rani’s voice commanded her attention and once the doctor had it she said, “I have had children with both a hanar and turian donors. Please trust me when I say that it is your mind that makes you uniquely who you are, not the composition of your physical body.”

How very asari of her, was the first thought that ran through Shepard’s mind, but the doctor’s words had the desired effect of breaking her out of her self-defeating mental spiral. “Thank you doctor,” she said after a moment, “I do understand what you are saying, my reconstruction does not make me any less myself.”

“No, it does not,” Dr. T’Rani stated in a firm tone. The asari was silent for a long moment studying her, long enough for Shepard to start getting concerned about what else the doctor had to tell her.

“Whatever it is,” Shepard finally broke the silence, “I would rather hear it now from you while I’m on the Citadel than later because I’m constantly monitored aboard the ship.”

Dr. T’Rani frowned at that bit of news, but after a moment the nais at least began to speak. “Spectre Shepard I understand you had a number of oocytes frozen when you went into the Alliance military. I understand this is fairly common among humans especially as your life span has increased past one hundred years.”

“Yes,” Amanda responded a bit bemused by the odd start of whatever the doctor had to tell her, “human females are born with all the oocytes they will ever produce and they are at their genetic healthiest around seventeen to nineteen years of age. That’s usually when everyone who isn’t planning on having children in their twenties choses to have some harvested so they can have children later.”

“Those oocytes have to be carefully frozen following a very specific protocol to keep ice crystals from forming within their cellular structure and rupturing them,” Dr. T’Rani said in a very careful tone.

Suddenly Amanda realized exactly where the doctor was leading, “Those are all I have now aren’t they.”

Dr. T’Rani slowly nodded, “The oocytes within your ovaries have been removed, likely because they were no longer viable and could present a health issue to you.”
Shepard remained silent while she dealt with this extra bit of knowledge. She didn’t really know whether or not to classify it as bad or neutral. Finally she inhaled a deep breath and said, “Well, I hadn’t planned on having any children for a few more decades anyway…part of the reason I had so many oocytes taken for storage. I suspected I wouldn’t be in a position to have them until my forties or fifties.”

The asari matron inclined her head in understanding, “I am pleased the news is not overly troubling to you. I had hoped it would not be given that you had already taken steps to ensure that you could have children later in life than your biology would normally let you.” Dr. T’Rani rose to her feet, “That then is all that I needed to tell you about your scan results. If you would follow me, the dermal treatment room is just down this hallway. I can see that the first treatment took care of the inflammation. A second treatment should assist even further with your healing. As soon as we begin the treatment, I’ll go over your nutritional requirements with you as well as some suggestions for your strength training.”

Shepard couldn’t help but feel a bit embarrassed that she hadn’t even restarted her usual training regimen. “I do need to keep those muscles that survived strong,” she replied, “but…will it look odd?”

Dr. T’Rani smiled at her as the doctor indicated for her to preceded the asari out the door, “Not at all, one advantage of the bio-synthetic muscle is that it reacts to strength training exactly like natural muscle.”

“Oh,” Shepard responded with surprise as she exited the room then turned right as the nais waved one hand in that direction. “Well that’s good to know.”

The next door down had a placard that read Dermal Regeneration Unit so Shepard was not at all surprised when Dr. T’Rani said, “Right here,” and opened the door for her. “Let’s get you changed into a medical gown and then we can begin the treatment.” Lovely, Shepard thought as the asari doctor handed her a sealed package containing a light blue examination onesie, she hated these things.
Shepard held onto the nearest handhold as she stood at shuttle’s cargo bay viewport and looked toward their destination. Omega Station was steadily growing larger as they closed the distance, allowing her to make out more of the details. The massive asteroid into which the station was built had been cracked in half by an encounter with another asteroid long ago, exposing it’s eezo rich interior. Initially the mining station had been fairly modest, but over the course of several thousand years of expansion it had greatly increased in size. Inside the station successive levels, or deck’s, extended deep into the hollowed-out shell, providing residential, commercial and industrial space that was divided out into districts by deck. The asteroid was still actively being mined, and the station’s eezo processing facilities were constructed in a long, cylinder-like structure that extended vertically from deep within the center of the station all the way out into space. Approached from the right angle, as they were now, the station took on an almost jellyfish like appearance in its silhouette, especially with the addition of mass effect shield generators extending in a reddish fringe around its external circumference.

As missions out in the Terminus Systems invariably required passing through Omega, or the Citadel of the Terminus as it was alternately known, at least once or twice for supplies and or intelligence, Shepard was no stranger to the station. It had been about five years since her last visit, but she doubted it had changed very much at all in the intervening years. Omega and Illium were frequently compared to one another, and for very good reason. Opportunists of all types, both the already powerful and rich and those seeking to be powerful and rich, were drawn to both locations due to the general apparent permissiveness of their laws and regulations. The most commonly cited were the drugs and goods, such as weapons, weapon modifications and gene mods, that were normally tightly regulated or illegal in Citadel space, but were legally available on both Illium and Omega once the required waivers were acknowledged and signed. Yet for all the apparent laxness toward rules and
regulations, both locations were ruled by powerful asari who made no attempt to hide the fact that they were closely monitoring everything that went on in their respective domains and strictly, and often harshly, enforced those laws and regulations that did exist. ‘Big Sister’ was an oppressive reality on both Gateway to the Terminus and the Citadel of the Terminus with their ubiquitous monitoring of public spaces. The main difference between the two locations was that on Omega she was likely to put a bullet through your head for your transgressions instead of slapping you with a steep fine or lawsuit as she did on Illium.

It had taken Tela Vasir and she almost four hours to make the trip from the Citadel to the MSV Menrva aboard the Spectre’s small courier ship the CSV Kyenio. During that time, they had, as the matron had earlier threatened, yet again discussed the importance of the centering meditation exercise to guard against the effects of the Cipher memories. Fortunately for Shepard’s patience with the topic that discussion had been fairly brief. She understood that the meditation exercises were important and intended on incorporating them into her daily routine, but bringing it up over and over again was not that helpful. Fortunately, the bulk of their transit time had been more productively spent discussing Omega Station, Warlord T’Loak and what impact this mission could have - both positive and negative - on any further interactions with the League Warlords.

Warlord T’Loak’s domain encompassed the entirety of the Omega Nebula which contained six-star systems: Amanda, Arinlankan, Batalla, Fathar, Kairavamori, and Sahrabarik where Omega Station, the gas giant Imorkan with its helium-3 refueling stations, and the Omega Nebula’s mass relays were located. The Amanda System notably included the planets Eingana and the world over which Shepard had died, Alchera. Eingana was a garden class world whose atmosphere had unfortunately been eezo poisoned by the conflict between the Thoi’han and the Inusannon hundreds of thousands of years ago over possession of the planet. All surviving species on the planet, like the ones on Thessia, were either biotic or biotic resistant and both Warlord T’Loak as well as the other League Warlords used the planet as a training ground for their elite Commando units. Within the tight enclave of the Alliance N-class Special Forces, rumor said that the League’s elite Commandos were frequently joined in their training by their sister Commandos from the Republics. Yet another piece of evidence of the strength of the relationship between the two Asari governments.

The Arinlankan System had only one non-garden class oceanic planet orbiting it, and was infrequently visited by asteroid miners. The Batalla System contained two colonized planets, one formerly owned by the Hegemony, Logasiri, which was nominally a garden class world, and Thunawanuro, a heavy gravity planet colonized by the Elcor which primarily exported uranium, thorium, and gold. The Fathar System included the planets Korar and Esan. Korar was a small airless planet only notable for its significant deposits of thorium, used in radiation shielding and the manufacture of spaceframe alloys, and had several mining installations dotted over its surface. Esan of course, was most famous for being the planet over which the League and Republics had conspired together to thwart the Hegemony’s planned invasion of the planet and in the process destroyed their most powerful and advanced fleet of the time, the Second Fleet of the Hegemony commanded by Admiral Sath Crom’korr.

The Kairavamori System contained the planet Uwan Oche, named for the batarian Uwan Consortium which financed its exploration. During and after Warlord T’Loak’s take-over of the Omega Nebula the Uwan Consortium found itself besieged by ‘pirate attacks’ upon its shipping vessels. Normally, the Consortium contracted with a few trusted batarian mercenary companies to have their ships escorted for their protection, however Warlord T’Loak’s forces targeted these escort ships as enemy combatants whenever they were spotted within the Omega Nebula. Within the course of a year, the companies holdings were depleted to the point that they had no choice but to accept Aria T’Loak’s offer of a one-time payment for all their assets on Uwan Oche. T’Loak’s forces landed immediately after the proposal was accepted and escorted all Consortium employees off the planet to ensure that no sabotage of the Warlord’s newly acquired property could take place. Lease
contracts were quickly made with various League mining and manufacturing companies and the planet’s boron mining and omni-gel manufacturing plants were swiftly brought back into production, providing T’Loak with a much-needed revenue stream to fund her further expansion.

Early on in their conversation, Shepard had inquired why they were discussing Warlord T’Loak’s holdings and how the nais had gained each of them. She knew this information, not only from her Alliance briefings, but also from the personal knowledge she had gained during her missions in the Terminus Systems. Tela had replied that she needed to know how well Shepard understood League politics, and whether or not she realized the extent to which the overall power balance between the League and Hegemony had altered with Warlord T’Loak’s takeover of the Omega Nebula. Prior to the attempt of the Hegemony to invade Esan, the Omega Nebula was a haven for Hegemony backed pirates and slavers who operated quite openly out of Omega Station. These pirates and slavers would frequently target League ships and worlds in the Spinward Terminus, the area of the Terminus Systems between the Coreward and Edgeward Terminus and Illium and extending past Illium into the Attican Traverse, and then flee into the lawless Omega Nebula to evade their pursuers. They would then offload their stolen goods and new slaves on Omega Station where they would usually wind up being re-sold within the Hegemony. In short, a lawless Omega Nebula was a thorn in the side of the League, bleeding them of resources and while adding the cost of the personnel and ships needed to guard their shipping and worlds.

In exchange for their assistance with the invasion of Esan by providing their Second Fleet, the Hegemony had demanded that the Warlords they supported volunteer a substantial amount of their naval forces to take part in it. Thus, the complete destruction of the invading fleet by the combined forces of the Republic’s Sixth and Second Fleets as well as another fleet provided by the League was crippling not only to the Hegemony, but also to the Hegemony backed Terminus Warlords. A vulnerability that the League immediately exploited by increasing their raiding activity against them. In the end, the League managed to take several systems from the Hegemony backed Warlords, pushing out from their primary holdings in the Spinward Terminus into the Anti-Spinward Terminus and expanding their combined territory by approximately a quarter before the Hegemony backed Warlords recovered enough to halt their advance.

It was during this time that Aria T’Loak arrived on Omega Station as a mercenary and began working for the krogan Warlord Galvok who ruled it at that time. T’Loak almost immediately began quietly moving her own forces aboard the station as well as very effectively subverting Galok’s own forces to switch their loyalty to her. As soon as she had enough of the station within her grasp to take over control of it, Aria openly challenged the krogan and was able to handily defeat him to claim Omega Station for herself. It took her a few months to oust the last pockets of resistance to her rule, but as soon as Omega Station was firmly under her control Aria T’Loak began expanding her sphere of influence. System by system the new minted asari Warlord expanded through the Nebula, locating and destroying the bases and hidden hideouts of the smaller Hegemony backed Warlords, independent pirates and slavers within it. Quite a few of these groups were completely destroyed by T’Loak’s forces, but even those that weren’t lost access all their former resources within the Nebula.

Once the entirety of the Omega Nebula was firmly under her control, Warlord T’Loak petitioned the League to join their alliance. Her request was immediately voted upon by the League Warlords, and with their acceptance the League’s overall controlled territory expanded into the Coreward Terminus. The League’s gain was the Hegemony’s loss. Not only had they lost Omega Station as a source of resources, goods and slaves into the Hegemony, but they had also lost all their associated forces and holdings within the Nebula itself including two garden worlds formerly under their control and several mining stations. As a result, the balance of power in the Spinward Terminus and Attican Traverse firmly shifted from favoring the Hegemony to favoring the League.

At the end of their discussion, Vasir seemed pleased with the depth and breadth of knowledge
Shepard had about the general history of the Terminus, the League and Warlord T’Loak in particular. Shepard had merely nodded her acknowledgment of the praise because the truth was that she knew as much as she did about the League only because they were so tightly allied with the Republics. As much as it rankled the pride of many in the Alliance, the blunt truth was that the only reason the Systems Alliance wasn’t just another client race of the Turian Hierarchy was due to the Asari Republic’s intervention in the First Contact War. Afterward, the Republics’ moved rather quickly to form amicable trading partnerships within the Alliance and this in turn was a substantial part of how Humanity had been able to expand so rapidly after they became an associate member of the Citadel Council. On the Alliance side it was somewhat of a love-hate relationship, but the Alliance government was all too aware that they needed the Republics continued goodwill as a bulwark against renewed aggression by the Turian Hierarchy and an escalation of the pirate and slaver proxy war they were currently waging with the Batarian Hegemony.

The result of this was that the upper levels of the Alliance military and government tended to be rather paranoid about situations which might negatively impact the System Alliance’s relationship with the Asari Republics. This paranoia extended to concern about angering the League as they were such tight allies to the Republics. As a result, all operatives and agents scheduled for assignment in the Terminus Systems received two weeks’ worth of detailed training about the history and current politics of the area before being sent out on their missions. Since Alliance Intelligence suspected that Warlord T’Loak in particular was an important Republic’s asset and Omega Station was a central Terminus trading center, which agents and operatives should expect to visit at least a few times during their missions, special attention was paid to the Warlord’s history and current political status.

As for how all of this was relevant to Shepard’s current mission? For the same reason it had been relevant to Shepard’s Alliance missions, Warlord T’Loak was important to the League, and presumably to the Republics, and not a person Shepard wanted to anger if it was at all avoidable. As Tela had put it, “Despite the fact that Aria T’Loak is one of the newest Warlords to join the League, she wields a substantial amount of influence within the League due to her takeover of the Omega Nebula. Impressing her daughter during this upcoming mission will garner Aria’s good will and make your further missions within League space go that much smoother. Angering her on the other hand…” Vasir’s expression turned unusually serious, “well let’s say that Councilor Tevos’ influence will be the only thing that allows you to continue operating in League space while still associating with Cerberus, but you likely won’t get much cooperation outside of that.”

“Commander,” Crewman Mark Smith called back to her from the shuttle’s cockpit interrupting Shepard’s thoughts and she frowned at the concern apparent in his tone, “Omega flight control wants us to land in one of the depressurized cargo bays midway along the processing facility extension.” Smith was right, Shepard mused, that was an odd request. “Normally shuttles with passengers let off at the Deck B landing bay that’s near the entrance to Afterlife,” he added and Shepard nodded in silent agreement as that was where she had been expecting to be let off.

“Did they say why?” she scowled absently at the shuttle deck as she waited for him to respond. Was this just Cerberus related paranoia on their part?

“No, Commander,” Smith responded after turning all the way around in his seat to look back at her. That was enough to make her decide that she didn’t like this at all. She turned her head to look at him, “Bring the shuttle to a halt relative to the station and tell Omega Control that Councilor Tevos’ emissary Huntress Am’da Saria wishes to speak directly to Huntress Liselle T’Loak.”

Smith’s eyes widened at that before he turned back around in his seat to do as she had directed him. After a few seconds, Shepard could feel the shuttle’s forward momentum cease and then she listened in as Mark began arguing with Omega Control over her request. It actually took a few minutes
before whomever was giving the orders in Omega Control to realize that they weren’t moving anywhere until they got an explanation beyond ‘because we said so’ and were actually serious about talking directly to Huntress T’Loak over the rerouting.

Finally a new voice came over the shuttle’s communication system, “Listen up,” Shepard’s eyebrows rose in surprise at the open aggression in the speakers tone, “Huntress,” the feminine voice took on a mocking overtone at that word, “you’re fortunate that I’m not threatening to shoot down your shuttle with this new plague that’s spreading though the Gozu District. As it is, I’m tempted to disable you and tow you in to imprison you both until I get some answers about how to stop this disease from killing anyone else.” Plague? What? And why did the younger T’Loak apparently think Cerberus had anything to do with it? Shepard had originally planned on formally greeting the younger T’Loak, but now was obviously not the time for it. From the Huntress’s angry tone, the only thing stopping her from carrying out her threat was the fact that the nais didn’t want to piss off Councilor Tevos by attacking her, especially after the Matriarch had personally arranged for Shepard’s visit to Omega. “You either land somewhere that isn’t connected to our environmental system or you don’t land,” Huntress T’Loak issued the ultimatum in such a firm tone that Shepard had no doubt that that the maiden absolutely meant it.

Shepard needed only a brief moment to consider her response, in Thessian she replied, “Spectre Vasir mentioned an illness spreading in the Gozu District in her briefing on Omega, but did not mention that anyone had died from it.”

“No one had until recently,” Huntress T’Loak’s voice sounded only slightly less hostile, “and the interesting thing is that no humans have yet come down with it.”

Well, that explained why the younger T’Loak suspected Cerberus, thought Shepard as she stated, “You suspect that this disease is actually a bio-weapon then and not natural, and that Cerberus is responsible for it.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw Smith frown unhappily at her statement as his translator translated her Thessian into English.

“After what happened on Trident?” the snarl of fury she got as a reply was venomous enough that the shuttle pilot physically flinched away from the dashboard speaker. Shepard’s eyebrow winged even further upward at it even as her expression revealed her dismay, that wasn’t a good sign at all. Asari didn’t feel emotions quite like humans due to the fact that their emotions didn’t affect their physical state or vice versa, no churning stomachs for them when they got upset. That didn’t mean however, that they didn’t get angry, it just meant that it usually took quite a bit more incitement before they showed it. Combine that with T’Loak just having mentioned Trident...not good at all. How had an illness morphed into a plague, how was it targeting non-humans, and was Cerberus really responsible for it?

“I agree,” her shuttle pilot’s head whipped around and Smith looked at her in hurt disbelief, “it does sound like something Cerberus might be involved in. And as such, I’m sure Councilor Tevos would expect me to volunteer to assist you in whatever way possible with your investigation into the source of the infection, and if it is a bio-weapon, stopping whatever party is behind it.”

“Oh no, I don’t think so,” was the maiden T’Loak’s immediate rejoinder, “we’re going to escort you to make your request of Dr. Solus and then your leaving Omega immediately afterward. And when I find the evidence of Cerberus’s involvement, you’d better not be anywhere in League space because not even Councilor Tevos would protect you after finding out about Cerberus latest attack.”

Shepard dearly wanted to argue with the maiden, but Tela had been very clear about the fact that Citadel Spectre’s held no official status in the League and had absolutely no extra-Judiciary powers within it. At the same time, she was still an official representative of the Citadel Council and thus
expected to treat the T'Loaks as de-facto heads of state. All the responsibilities without any of the advantages…which meant that instead of trying to persuade the maiden to change her mind, Shepard instead said, “As you wish Huntress T'Loak, I will limit myself to the mission given to me by Councilor Tevos and nothing further.”

That elicited short, harsh sounding laugh from the nais, “Maybe Spectre Vasir did brief you,” allowed the younger T'Loak. “In any case, either land where you were instructed, or leave.” The communications channel cut off after that, making it clear that was the end of their conversation.

Shepard let out one long, aggrieved exhale before sternly corralling her emotions. “Follow the flight path in, and then return to the ship until I call for a pickup,” she issued her instructions to Crewman Smith in a sternly clipped tone. “I don’t want to give them any other target besides myself.”

“But,” Smith turned in his seat, a stricken look upon is face, “what about you Commander? If I leave, the ship won’t be able to stay in contact with or monitor you. We won’t know if you need any help, or if they’ve imprisoned you!”

“Shepard,” Miranda’s voice came over the shuttle’s communications, “I have to agree, the shuttle should remain there so that we can maintain communications with you. It will also act as a relay for EDI so she can infiltrate and monitor their communications and, if necessary, provide you with assistance while you’re on station.”

“Absolutely not!” Shepard snapped back, her current aggravation with Miranda causing her temper to rise much quicker than normal, “this situation is currently tenuous enough without giving them cause to move to a more aggressive stance against us. As things stand right now, Huntress T'Loak is not going to imprison me. She’s going to escort me directly to Dr. Solus so I can speak to him, and then march me directly back to get me off her station. If they detect EDI either in their systems or attempting to hack into their systems however, I’m sure the situation would deteriorate very quickly.”

“Then why not have Crewman Smith remain there with the shuttle for you to return? That will allow us to remain in contact with you and verify that things are going as smoothly as you anticipate.” Shepard could tell by Miranda’s tone that the woman was aiming for sounding reasonable in the face of her anger.

Before she had left the Citadel Vasir and M’Tara had surprised her with a very welcome gift and box of very unwelcome ones. The welcome gift was the complete upgrade of her armor with the exception of the grey and dark blue external Anyodine armor shell. The unwelcome gift was the box containing her old armor component parts as well as the burnt and fused remains of the biometric scanners and signal interceptors that had been embedded into her old armor. Rather proved the point that it wasn’t paranoia when they actually were spying on you. As she had suspected all along, Cerberus really had been monitoring her every reaction and recording everything she said or did while wearing her old armor.

Once they rendezvoused with the MSV Menvra, Shepard headed directly to the Armory with the box of armor pieces and destroyed monitoring equipment in her arms with both Vasir and Lawson trailing along behind her through the middle of the CIC giving the crew quite the scene to gossip about later. The asari Spectre using her biotics to float the heavy case for Shepard’s new armor while Miranda trailed along behind vehemently protesting Vasir’s presence on the ship the entire way. They had all ended up in the Armory where Shepard had all but tossed the box she was holding at Jacob Taylor as he rose to greet her. The man just managed to grab onto it before it fell onto the floor while giving her an astonished look at her behavior.

“Use these to put together an emergency set of armor for me to keep down here, but without the monitoring and spying devices,” Shepard clipped out the words in a positively arctic tone. “I'll be
keeping my set of primary armor up in my quarters which are off limits to everyone as of this moment. If someone needs access, then they can wait until I have time to let them in myself.” She paused to shift her gaze over to the abruptly silent Lawson, “Do I make myself clear to the both of you?”

“Yes, Commander,” Jacob replied promptly, while Miranda remained silent, a subtle frown marring her features. Shepard was aware of Vasir taking up a spot next to the Armory doorway, leaning against the wall and crossing her arms with a smirk upon her dark blue lips. She turned toward Miranda and closed the distance between them, getting in the Cerberus operative’s face. “Was there some question you had about my orders Lawson? Is there some reason you think your entitled to monitoring me more than the Alliance did while on a mission?”

Miranda stiffened at her closeness, “No Commander, so long as you understand there is a certain amount of monitoring we need to do of your implants and cybernetics to ensure your health.”

Behind Shepard Vasir snorted in derision, “Considering she was fifteen pounds underweight and her skin grafts inflamed and irritated when she arrived at the Citadel, I’ll have to question your competence at managing that.” Lawson’s lips pressed together and spots of color bloomed in her cheeks at Tela’s smoothly taunting tone as the dark-haired woman’s blue eyes shifted to look past Shepard to glare at the asari Spectre lounging by the door who was more than likely smirking at the operative.

“You’ll get the exact same amount of data and access to my communications as the Alliance did while I was on a mission,” Shepard replied to Miranda, drawing the other woman’s attention back to her. “More specific medical related information recorded by the armor’s medical VI suite will be kept within its on-board memory. I’ll turn that information over to Dr. Chakwas after every mission and the two of you can go over it and then brief me if there are any changes or concerns.”

Shepard more felt in her aura than saw Vasir lever herself from the wall and come up beside her. The other Spectre slung one arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a one-armed hug obviously intended to flaunt their newfound comradeship in Miranda’s face. “Don’t worry,” Tela purred, “we took very good care of her while she was at the Citadel. Made sure she ate plenty of healthy food, socialized with caring friends, got enough rest, and even had that nasty skin irritation cleared up by our doctor.”

Okay, there was making a point and rubbing another’s face in their error, Shepard decided, and they were now well pass the first and into the second. It was time to drop the conversation and leave. Besides, she needed to separate Tela and Miranda before Vasir managed to actually goad the dark-haired woman into attacking her. Grabbing the wrist of the asari’s arm wrapped around her shoulders, in one move Shepard shifted out from under it, pivoted and pulled Vasir along behind her out toward the Armory doorway. “I believe I’ve made my expectations and limits clear,” Shepard called back over her shoulder as she and the asari exited the room.

As the Armory doors closed behind them, she heard Taylor say to Lawson, “I told you she’d be really pissed,” in a tone that combined equal parts annoyance and resignation.

The events of the day before flashed through Shepard’s mind in the instant before she replied to Miranda’s oh so reasonable sounding suggestion that Smith wait upon the station for her. “Honestly, I’m ordering him back to the ship specifically so you won’t be tempted to order EDI to hack into their systems anyway and spark an all-out shooting war between us and the League.” Was she being a bit too frank? Probably. Right now did she care? No, not really.

She immediately turned her attention to the shuttle’s pilot who was looking as if he wanted nothing more than to just disappear into his seat. “Crewman Smith, I expect you to drop me off and return
directly to the ship until I call you for a pickup. You will not delay, stop or otherwise deviate from the most direct flightpath to the Menvra. Am I clear?"

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, hardly daring to look up at her as Miranda immediately began protesting her decision, her voice through the speakers steadily gaining in volume.

“Good,” Shepard responded and then pointed at his console, “and turn that down.”

Smith knew full well she meant the volume of their communications channel with the ship. As soon as the shuttle was silent, Shepard said reassuringly to him, “Relax, Miranda will be angry with me not you. Besides, I was serious about T’Loak hurrying this along. You might have time to land and get a coffee before you need to come back to get me.”

He looked relieved at that idea and attempted a small smile at her in return, “You’re probably right Commander, I won’t take off my flight suit.”

Ah to be so naive, thought Shepard as she smiled back at him projecting an unconcerned image. Their troubles might just be starting if this plague was actually developed by Cerberus, or even if it was believed to be developed by Cerberus. “Speaking of the younger T’Loak,” Shepard commented, “let’s get moving toward this cargo bay before she starts wondering what exactly we are up to out here.”

“Umm Commander,” he sounded hesitant as his hands upon the control panel activated the shuttle’s controls to get it moving again, “what about this disease? What if they’re wrong that humans don’t get it?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Shepard responded as she grabbed her helmet, “I’ll go in fully suited up and stay on my own air supply the entire time I’m on the station. Even if I can’t get sick from it, I don’t want to risk that I could be a carrier of it and infect someone else. I’ve got enough air for eight hours at combat usage levels, twelve otherwise with the re-breather technology in this armor. That will be more than enough time for me to do what I need to do and return to the ship.”

“Understood Commander,” Smith sounded reassured by her response. “I’ll stay ready for your call.”

Judging that it was time to finish her preparations Shepard slid her helmet down over her head and then carefully locked it into place. Lifting her gauntlet, she activated her new omni-tool, linked up with the armor’s VI, and kicked off its standard diagnostic checklist to make sure everything was sealed and working properly. The new Serrice Council made VI flashed up an image of her armor on the omni-tool’s haptic display and began displaying the results of its diagnostic checks as it verified that her armor was completely sealed, that the air supply was good, and that every system in the suit was working properly. Even though she really didn’t need to, for the VI would let her know if anything was wrong and even suggest steps for remediation, Shepard watched closely as all the function and safety checks were successfully completed one by one. Her therapy sessions with Dr. Chakwas had helped immensely with her reactions to putting on a helmet and being sealed up inside her armor. She no longer had to actively push down thoughts of her death while wearing her helmet and hearing the quiet click of the air supply mechanism right below her ear, but she doubted she would ever be as nonchalant about stepping into an airless environment as she had been before her death.

The new omni-tool and VI, as well as all the other upgrades to her armor were courtesy of Councilor Tevos, who had authorized the team of Citadel Intelligence technicians that had thoroughly deconstructed her original armor looking for any bit of useful information they could glean on Cerberus to substantially upgrade the armor as they put it back together. In Shepard’s estimation, they may have gone a bit overboard with the rebuild. The armor’s underlay, outer lay, and protective
plating were now from the Illium based company Kurinth’s Armory, which was known for its exorbitantly expensive upper end armor for biotics, while all of its electronics and integrated virtual intelligence components as well as its kinetic barriers and shield emitters were absolutely top of the line components from Serrice Council. Mechanical augmentations based on spider silk from Jormangund Technology, a very highly respected Human company that produced top of the line sniper rifles and the armor to go with them to steady the sniper’s aim when handling such a powerful rifle, had been added as well, enhancing her strength and speed in combat as well as coordinating with the armor’s VI to stabilize her aim.

As far as Shepard was concerned however, the absolutely best thing about her armor was the gunmetal grey armor case that they gave her to keep it in. The armor case, which was now located in her quarters aboard the Menvra, was secured with a Security Level Six bio-identity lock. In addition, both the VI and the armor’s new integrated omni-tool came with removable OSD’s which held the entire code for the software. Without the OSD the VI and omni-tool were essentially bricked, and while she wasn’t using them, they were kept within another Security Level Six container within the Level Six armor case. All of this made getting into her armor substantially more complicated, but the peace of mind it gave her about whether or not Cerberus was using her own armor and omni-tool to spy on her was priceless and invaluable.

“Coming up on the cargo bay now Commander,” Smith announced and Shepard moved forward to look through the cockpit window. She could see a series of cargo bays extending down this portion of the processing facility, each one protected from stray space debris by a shimmering barrier. “I don’t think they use this section much Commander,” the pilot commented, “this is further out than you usually see ships arriving to drop off bulk loads of materials for the processor facility.”

Shepard glanced over at him, reminded that he had been a merchant ship pilot before joining Cerberus specifically for this mission so he probably did know what cargo was transported to and from Omega and where it was delivered and picked up. The only thing she knew was that the refined eezo produced here was transferred from heavily guarded bays closer to the station itself. She stepped back, “Alright go ahead and raise the cockpit barrier. I want you to take off as soon as I’m off the shuttle to head directly back to the ship.”

“Yes, Commander,” he replied and a moment later the shimmer of a barrier cut off the shuttle’s cockpit from the rest of the shuttle. It would be sufficient to protect him from the de-pressurization of the shuttle’s cargo area when the main shuttle hatch opened to the station’s cargo bay. Less than a minute later they were in front of the bay, the barrier dropped and Smith guided the shuttle in to land. “Good luck, Commander,” Smith said as the shuttle’s main clamshell hatch began opening, “I’ll be waiting for your signal to come back and get you.”

Shepard nodded, her attention more on the five feminine figures in armor she could now see waiting for her at the far end of the bay through the cockpit window. “It shouldn’t take very long,” she repeated her earlier assurance, “and if it does, I’ll get in contact with the ship to let you know.” From the way the Huntresses were arranged, four of them arrayed around one in the center, Shepard suspected that was Huntress T’Loak. Once the hatch was fully open, its lower half forming a convenient ramp, Shepard exited the shuttle and then stopped and turned around when she was a safe distance from it. She needed to make sure that the Cerberus pilot actually followed her orders. Fortunately, she didn’t have to wait more than a few seconds before the shuttle lifted off and then exited the bay, moving backward on its maneuvering thrusters. That was good, but Shepard knew it didn’t necessarily mean that he would actually make it all the way back to the ship.

Once the cargo bay’s barrier curtain went back up, Shepard turned her attention to the group of asari waiting for her at the far end of the bay. She made her way in that direction, weaving her way past a few heavy cargo containers that would have provided excellent cover for the asari to shelter behind
in case they had proven hostile. Once she was past the containers, she stopped a few meters in front of the loosely arrayed group and took a moment to look over them. Now that she was closer, Shepard could see the face of the central asari the other four were guarding through the faceplate of the nais’ helmet. The maiden was bluish-violet in hue and Shepard could just see the distinctive double-lined, u-shaped violet markings above the nais’ blue eyes, markings that were the same as the maiden’s mother’s. She bowed respectfully and said in Thessian, “Saala Huntress Liselle T’Loak. I greet you in the name of my patron, Matriarch Tevos of the Lero Lineage of the Ulee Republic who serves the Republics as their chosen Councilor on the Citadel. I am Huntress Am’da Saria.”

To Shepard’s annoyance, instead of properly returning her greeting, the maiden chuckled at her, “You do speak like an Armali noble, I thought I noticed the accent earlier. T’Soni’s skill as a teacher is apparent in how well you speak our language.”

Shepard hadn’t been expecting to hear Liara’s name and couldn’t quite hide her subtle flinch at it. Fortunately, her faceplate was still darkened, providing her some privacy and preventing the younger T’Loak from noticing the heartache in her expression. As Shepard took a moment to get her emotions under control, the maiden apparently took her silence as a sign of disapproval, or at least obstinacy in insisting that the formalities were met.

“Fine,” the younger T’Loak snapped the word, “Saala, emissary of Councilor Tevos. I am Huntress Liselle T’Loak, daughter of Warlord Aria T’Loak ruler of this Station and of the Omega Nebula.” The maiden hurried through the formal response in a manner that clearly showed her annoyance with it and by extension with Shepard.

The human Spectre eyed the maiden warily, this was definitely getting off to a rough start between whatever disease was spreading on the station and the maiden blaming Cerberus for it and by extension herself. The younger T’Loak did not give her any time to figure out what she could say to smooth things over however before continuing in a sharp tone. “Now that is done, “Huntress T’Loak said,” I want to see your face. See if you are really Shepard or someone else hiding underneath that helmet. Especially since I can feel your aura from here, and it seems unusually powerful for a human.” Unseen behind her darkened faceplate Shepard scowled at the maiden, so much for keeping her identity hidden. Before she could say anything though the maiden continued on unabated, “Yes, I know what Councilor Tevos desired, but these are my sworn Huntresses. So long as you keep up your end of the ruse, they will not betray that you are not an asari.”

Shepard breathed out an exasperated sigh and then activated her armor’s external speakers. “I can keep up my end of the ruse,” she assured the nais as she altered the opaqueness of her helmet, allowing the five asari to see her face.

Liselle T’Loak’s blue eyes widened slightly upon seeing Shepard’s all too human face. After Dr. T’Rani’s treatments, she finally looked well on her way to a full recovery, but Shepard knew that you could still see slivers of the synthetic muscles in between the segments of skin. Hopefully they would disappear in another few days, but right now they were still visible. “So, Cerberus actually did it,” the maiden seemed a bit bemused by that fact, “mother was certain that they would fail.”

From the few details during their call, Shepard hadn’t been certain whether or not either T’Loak was aware of Liara’s presence or mission on Omega. It now seemed as if they were aware of both; that Liara had been here, and that her own body had been taken here by the Blue Suns so they could sell it to the Collectors. “Yes, they did,” Shepard responded, not quite keeping the curtness from her tone as she re-darkened the armor’s faceplate to hide her features.

“Don’t,” the harsh sounding command from the Huntress came loudly over the speakers embedded in Shepard’s helmet, “I’m not finished with my questions yet, and I want to see your face while you
Shepard’s eyes narrowed at the maiden’s tone, and in the back of her mind she felt both Thalion and Lindariel stir in offended agitation at it. Before she could censor the impulse, she took a few more steps forward as she did as the maiden asked and opaqued her faceplate. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the two nearest Huntress guards react to her drawing nearer than they liked to their principal by turning toward her as their bodies became sheathed in bluish-white barriers. “Ask your questions of me then Huntress Liselle T’Loak,” her strictly formal tone carried hints of Thalion and Lindariel within it, not that the maiden in front of her would know that little fact.

The younger T’Loak glared at her, but there was also a hint of wariness in her gaze as if newly aware of the fact that perhaps she could press Shepard only so far before the human Spectre began pressing back. “Your aura?” The maiden spat out the question suspiciously. “I’ve never felt any human with such a strong aura, and I’ve never heard anything about the first human Spectre being an unusually strong biotic for a human.”

Shepard frowned at the question, not really wanting to answer it. Unfortunately, her aura clearly advertised to any other biotic near enough to feel it the fact that her biotics were unusually strong for a human. That meant she would be getting this question over and over again, so she might as well resign herself to getting asked it. “A few hundred years ago the Republics did research into whether or not they could artificially enhance your biotics by making your eezo nodules denser faster than would be naturally possible.” Shepard took some pleasure in the slight frown of puzzlement that formed on the maiden’s face at the start of her explanation, apparently this was not the answer the younger T’Loak had expected from her. “The answer was that it was possible, but the process would kill the asari you were trying to enhance due to the amount of neural feedback it created as part of the process.” Shepard crossed her arms over her armored chest as she continued in a dry tone, “Since I was already dead though and couldn’t really become any deader from it, Cerberus used the process to make my eezo nodules denser. Thus my biotics are now substantially stronger than before.” Shepard could tell from the maiden’s expression that Huntress T’Loak didn’t know whether or not to believe her answer. “If you doubt me, then contact Councilor Tevos for confirmation, the medical team was able to confirm that was the process used by Cerberus.”

Far from appeasing Huntress T’Loak that seemed to only step up the nais’s glare a degree. “And the reason why your aura feels as if it belongs to someone much older? I’ve been around enough humans to know that your aura is unusual in more than just its strength.”

Well, well, Huntress T’Loak was well trained in aura sensing, though Shepard sourly, how unfortunate. One eyebrow rose as she gave the maiden a withering look, “Even though I’m not that old I’ve been through quite a bit in my relatively short life, I guess it’s aged my aura.” It was definitely worth a try…

“Bullshit,” both of Shepard’s eyebrows rose at the spat out human epithet from the younger T’Loak. “I’ve been around humans who have lived through all kinds of experiences. Experiences and loses that rival even yours, and their aura’s don’t feel the way yours does.”

Shepard’s eyes narrowed at that, but she knew the maiden was correct, she was hardly the only human to experience what she had during her life. She was not going to even respond to this question however since it would open up a can of worms she wouldn’t and couldn’t get into with the maiden. It was time to call a halt to this, decided Shepard, even if it did offend the maiden.

“Be as that may,” responded Shepard coolly, “are you questioning the judgment of the Council that I am Amanda Athene Shepard? Shall we contact Councilor Tevos’ office so you may direct your questions to the Matriarch concerning whether or not I am Spectre Shepard?” Ohhh that was not at
all appreciated, thought Shepard in amusement as the maiden’s glare grew even more vitriolic. If looks could kill, then certainly she would be dead twice over.

“That will not be necessary,” spat the younger T’Loak, “let’s get this over with so I can get you off my station.”

“Very well,” replied Shepard. As she had suspected, the maiden did not in fact want to directly question Councilor Tevos about the validity of her identity. With any luck, she mentally crossed her fingers, refusing to answer her daughter’s probing questions wouldn’t greatly affect her standing with the elder T’Loak, or at least not enough for Warlord T’Loak to openly oppose her presence in League space.

“You first,” Huntress T’Loak made a graceful, exaggerated motion with her entire arm, “I want to keep my eye on you instead of having you behind me.”

Shepard smirked, “You’ll have to provide directions then until we get to the station proper. I’ve never been in the processing plant.”

The younger T’Loak made a scoffing sound as she responded, “Through the doors and then follow the central passageway toward the station. That’s to the right if you need more specific directions,” the maiden added with sarcastic helpfulness.

Of course it would be that simple, Shepard groused to herself as she turned away from the maiden, her gaze sliding along the wall of the cargo bay until she spotted the aforementioned doors and headed toward them. How was she to know that the cargo bays opened directly on the processing plant’s central corridor?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!