Promises Delivered - New Beginnings

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Summary

Leaving the ranks of the Systems Alliance but remaining a Spectre, Shepard continues fighting the galaxy's battles with Liara and the crew of the Knight Shade at her side, as assassins and radical political parties relentlessly plot against them. Old foes return to haunt the Spectre, her friends and her family, as they find a way forward in a slowly recovering galaxy.

Notes

Welcome back and I hope you enjoy this latest addition to The Chronicles of Samantha Shepard! Many thanks to my co-writer, Old_Gamer, for the continued effort of writing yet another installment in the series. I hope to post every Friday, but no guarantees on this one; I'll leave a note at the end of the current chapter if the next draft is not to a point where I feel comfortable posting it the next week. Thank you in advance for understanding. Thus, it begins...

A Grá - My Love (Gaelic)

Amantia - lover (Thessian)

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

Grá mo chroí - love of my heart (Gaelic)
Inanna: pinnacle of Asari blending, perfect unity of two spirits into one (from 'real world' Sumerian Goddess of Love, Fertility, and War)

Ionúin Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)
Homecoming

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 16 Jun 2188

The joy of being home was nearly overwhelming as the hatch opened and Liara stepped out of the Aletheia, Shepard in tow; her skin flushed as the estate's entire staff clapped and cheered in celebration of their return to Thessia. Roughly halfway down the ramp, Liara paused; a loving smile graced her lips and her eyes held just a hint of moisture as she addressed them. "It is wonderful to see all of you again. The grounds looked amazing on our approach and appear even better up close, now that we are here. You have no idea how much I have looked forward to this day... to be home, once more. Thank you so much for the wonderful welcome."

Mozia drew a deep breath to calm the flutter in her stomach caused by the most longed for arrival of the young leader of House T'Soni; her heart swelled with tremendous joy and relief – to see the daughter of Lady Benezia return home after the war, safe and in apparent good health, was beyond any outcome she had dared to dream. Her attention was drawn away from the young maiden as a number of commandos laughed and began to rapidly move to the side.

A rough voice sounded from the back. "Goddess be damned! Why didn't someone tell me Liara had arrived?" In commando leathers rather than any type of formal wear, the interim Guard Captain eagerly barreled out from between the lines of the Second and Third Commando Teams and ran straight to the base of the ramp upon which Liara had stopped. A wide grin spread across her face as she shouted cheerily, "Screw the formalities, Little Wing! Come give your father a hug!"

"Goddess!" Liara shook her head, blue fingertips scrubbing quickly across her forehead in embarrassment while a smirk of utter disbelief quickly formed on her face. "It's good to know you haven't changed much, if at all, during your time here, Dad." After casting a quick glance of apology toward Mozia, Liara ran, laughing, down the ramp and into her father's waiting arms.

"Damned straight, Liara." Aethyta picked her up and spun around in a circle as she gave her daughter a huge hug. "Welcome home, Babe!" Dropping her back to the ground while keeping a protective arm around her daughter's waist, the matriarch looked up the ramp to the true Captain of the T'Soni Guard. "Well? Come on, Shepard. Get your ass down here!"

Chuckling and following Liara, the Spectre shook her head as she descended the ramp to clasp forearms with the slightly overzealous matriarch. "Good to see you too, Aethyta." Turning her head toward the Regent, she chuckled, "Sorry for the lack of discipline in this rabble, Mozia, but I have to admit... it sure feels good to be here." She looked over to the commandos, still roughly grouped as teams yet obviously eager to say their own hellos, and belted out, "Dismissed!"

The recent arrivals were immediately engulfed as the entire staff swarmed forward, hugs and laughter dominating the outdoor reception until Lyessa raised her voice above the clamor. "I do believe I received a request for a late 'welcome home' dinner." She looked at Liara and bowed to the new Lady of House T'Soni, smiling with a mixture of delight and relief as she returned to an upright position. "As such, the food is being set out as we speak, so we need to move into the house and eat... before all the hot and chilled foods meet somewhere in the middle."

The pure joy at being home left Liara feeling extraordinarily free to express herself, so she laughed and stepped forward to link arms with the House Steward. "That, my dearest Lyessa, sounds like the best idea I've heard since we left the CGC!"
It was much later when Shepard finally managed to slip into bed to enjoy the sensation of fresh, crisp covers against her skin; she stretched out flat on her back, laced her fingers together behind her head and closed her eyes as she let out a huge yawn. Liara slipped in beside her and took her customary position, nestling into the nook of her siame's shoulder and throwing a leg across Samantha's hip before sliding a foot down the woman's calf muscle to intertwine their legs. Her right hand was gently caressing Shepard's chest as she whispered, "I love you, Sam... with all that I am. Thank you for this moment... for bringing us safely home."

"And I love you, Liara, more than anything... You're very welcome and there is no place I'd rather be." Shepard unlaced her fingers and dropped her right arm to wrap it around her promised and pull her closer, the warmth of Liara's body against hers bringing a calming sensation of comfort and peace to her soul. "I still find it amazing... to realize we really made it here... that we actually survived everything to arrive on Thessia to get bonded." She tipped her head and pressed her lips to the pebbled blue forehead of her grá mo chroí, her next words coming out as nothing more than a breath of warm air. "Gods, this is so wonderful."

A shiver of exhilaration originating from the point of the kiss, Liara pushed herself up and kissed Samantha softly on the cheek before continuing upward until she could peer into the loving eyes of her future life partner. As dark blues – already well on their way to obsidian – met the deep ocean greens before her, Liara whispered softly, "I agree, Siame, that there is no place I would rather be... and no one I would rather be with than you, my Promised One. I desire to join with you this evening, to celebrate our new life together. Is that a possibility or are you too tired?"

Smiling warmly, Shepard answered, "Oh... that is definitely a possibility, Liara." Her hand had followed the Asari as she rose up, so gentle fingers immediately slipped into the supple folds of Liara's lower back, drawing a soft gasp of pleasure from her ready lover. At the same time, Samantha's other hand slipped from beneath her head to wrap softly around the Asari's neck, drawing her Iónúin Álainn downward to claim blue lips in a deep, intimate kiss. Liara's heart swelled as she melted against Shepard's magnificent body, their forms fitting together with practiced ease as their minds merged within the beguiling teal oceans of Inanna.

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 21 Jun 2188

After a couple days spent transferring all their possessions from the Aletheia to the appropriate locations within the house, both Shepard and Liara had to shift their individual points of focus. Liara began working with Mozia to get caught up on the status of the household while Shepard began space trials aboard her new ship with what crew was available, as well as working with Hailot Jatok to round out the Krogan Commander's ground team.

Shepard was surprised when Admiral Hackett offered her a choice of any of the available N7s. She immediately mentioned Lee Riley... but a very short discussion revealed that the Admiral had the young officer on a fast track to replace Shepard as the premier Alliance N7, and the Spectre refused to deny such an opportunity to her friend and former comrade-in-arms.

"I do have a young Lieutenant who's showing a lot of promise, Captain." Hackett stated with a smile. "I'd love for you to take him on for a two-year assignment and teach him what it truly means to be an N7."

Relaxing easily back in her chair, Shepard laughed in response as she quipped, "You mean going my own way, ignoring any orders I didn't like and basically being a royal pain in the ass?"

"Well... I suppose that comes along with the job description." Hackett smiled and nodded. "I
believe that's one of the integral skill sets that completes the requirement to be an independent operator... The ability to make the tough calls without worrying about what the brass will say when they find out what the Hell you did.” He paused before adding, "That's what set you apart from the rest, Shepard. It's what made you great.”

Remaining silent for a brief moment as she mulled over the admiral's potential motives for his generous offer, she finally acquiesced to his request. Hackett had proven himself to be a strong ally – whatever his reasons for wanting a young Alliance N7 on her squad, she trusted his judgment and agreed to take the man on. "I suppose I can give him a trial run, Sir. But... he'll have to be able to serve under the command of a Krogan by the name of Hailot Jatok, so not too much of an independent operator; at least not to start. Then, we'll see what time and experience brings. Agreed?"

"I'm sure he'll be fine, Shepard." Hackett drew a quick breath before letting out a satisfied hum, both relieved and pleased that the Spectre had accepted his suggestion. "His name is Harley Creath and, as I was anticipating your acceptance, you can expect him as soon as tomorrow evening. God speed, Captain."

When Harley Creath arrived on June twenty-second, as promised by Admiral Hackett, Shepard left him to work with Jatok to select from a list of potential ground team candidates and shifted her own energies yet again so she could work on finding personnel for the remaining open crew billets aboard the **Knight Shade**, which still included a few Combat and Defensive Systems operators and, perhaps more importantly, a ship's doctor.

No matter how busy their days seemed to get, Shepard and Liara attempted to attend a daily workout with the ground teams and the House commando teams, trying their best to maintain a regular training regimen amidst all the distractions that came along with being home. Having worked with the commandos before, that half of the equation was fairly effortless; working with Jatok and Creath was another matter entirely. The integration between the Krogan and a second N7 worked well, but the Asari fighting style was unique; neither of the new additions possessed Shepard's advantage of having been trained during their youth by a pair of knowledgeable Asari Huntresses.

The first few practice runs had been bruising, but the ship's captain and her XO were relishing having their friends together; enjoying the luxury of being able to hone their skills as a team during peacetime rather than being forced to do so as a necessity for survival meant that mistakes in technique or aim or squad cohesion were not fatal. The presence of Traynor and Riana was a given, but having Tali back with them was something neither had honestly believed would ever happen. Shepard had been caught off-guard during the Normandy's visit to Rannoch, when Tali had assumed the vacant Engineering-Maintenance position aboard the Knight Shade was hers for the taking.

The Quarian had seen the partial crew roster and noted the empty slot... so, before the position had even been offered, Tali had unequivocally stated, "I would be honored to fill that slot, Shepard, and no, I don't need to think about it.” It hadn't been much later when they realized that Medica could come along as part of a package deal to fill the Medical Technician billet, as the SILC unit was well-versed in multiple physiologies. As such, Medica provided a much needed stop-gap as, while the Townhouse in Armali had a dedicated physician, Shepard still needed to secure the services of two more doctors – a general physician for the Country Estate and a trauma doctor for the **Knight Shade**.

Even though the battle simulations were going relatively well and Shepard provided frequent *unofficial* updates, Tevos occasionally called to ask Shepard about the status of her crew selections. The councilor smiled softly as Shepard answered the call. "You are looking wonderful, Spectre.
Living on Thessia is good for you."

Shepard laughed. "Actually, not having so many people trying to kill me is what's been good for me, Tevos... along with actually getting a decent night's sleep every night."

"I still say Thessia agrees with you, Captain." The Asari's smile faltered. "So, I apologize for being so abrupt, but I need an update on your crew selections before the meeting I must attend in..." she paused to glance to the side before finishing with,"... less than twenty minutes."

"So... it seems things on the CGC aren't slowing down, even with the war being over." Shepard shook her head. "I'm sorry, Tevos. I know a lot of people out there are still in need..."

Liara stepped in and bumped her on the hip, forcing her to slip over a bit so she could see the screen as well. "But we also know how hard the Normandy, her captain and her crew worked... and how much they all need a bit of a break before jumping back into it... Don't we?"

Tevos, entertained by the brashness of the formally so reserved young maiden, chuckled softly before answering, "Yes, we do, Liara. I am happy to see you also looking so well. I hope the bonding preparations are coming along as scheduled... I still have the entire week of August eleventh clear on my calendar. I very much look forward to coming home for a bit... but your bonding will undoubtedly be the highlight of my visit."

"Yes, they are... and thank you again for loaning me Sha'ira for nearly two months." She gave her a sidelong glance as she continued, "I certainly understand how difficult prolonged separations can be, so I promise she'll be returning with you to the Nebula as scheduled."

"I still wish she had gone with you directly, instead of waiting... but she assures me that with your link and Shepard being a biotic, the adaptation will be much easier for her than most." Tevos sighed. "I know she is likely correct, but only eight weeks?"

"Don't worry, Tevos, we'll be fine. Besides, an extra week or two likely wouldn't have made that much of a difference." Shepard smiled and winked. "As for your crew update, I'll get the formal report out by the end of the day, but I've spent a good share of my waking hours on identifying my team and I believe you'll be pleased. I have already identified eight of the ship's twelve crew and two of the six members of the second ground team... All the details will be in the first week's summary, due by close of business today. I haven't forgotten."

"Of course not." Tevos blushed slightly. "I am sorry if I insinuated such by my request." She laughed nervously. "Honestly, I knew you would get me the information, but I simply wanted to hear your voice and see your face. It reveals so much more than an impersonal electronic report can provide."

Liara smiled knowingly and responded, "Then next time, Councilor, call after hours and we can simply chat... as friends. You don't need an excuse if you simply want to talk and see how the bonding preparations are coming along... or to ensure that Sha'ira has arrived safely. You are welcome to call any time."

"Thank you, Liara." Tevos blinked and her face held a pensive expression as she remained silent for a moment before continuing in a solemn tone. "Your mother and I were friends... and I would like to be able to continue that familial connection, if you are open to such an imposition on my part."

The councilor's words tugged on her heart strings and Liara answered in a manner much less formal than usual. "You will never be an imposition, Raesia. I believe I would enjoy hearing stories of my mother from when she was younger... particularly those of her field work, likely unsuitable to tell a
young, growing daughter before she came of age."

"I will look forward to that, Liara." Understanding why Liara had responded in the way she did, Tevos smiled sadly as she continued, "Your mother was a wonderfully gifted Asari, taken from us before her time. I will be overjoyed to tell you much more of her accomplishments than what you could ever learn from listening to or reading the historical archives."

"Thank you." Liara reached over and clasped Shepard's hand. "I will look forward to such days when you can simply visit without us having to discuss the fate of the galaxy."

Shepard smiled in satisfaction as she reviewed the current roster, recalling how Garrus had provided the names of her future Bridge Operations Officer, Daxa Rusim, as well as her Combat Systems Operator, Tonan Jorrill – both of whom had been extremely honored to accept the positions once Shepard had formally offered them. Based solely on Bau's and Kasumi's report of the emergency surgery on Omega that had saved Arai T'Loak's life, Shepard hadn't hesitated to accept Medica, Tali's companion, when she volunteered to serve as a med tech; the SILC would bring incredible trauma capabilities to the team that she couldn't afford to turn down.

The roster was shaping up nicely and Shepard pressed the 'send' button, transmitting her first weekly update to the Council. She stood and stretched as the screen went dark, thankful to have the first week behind her. She had been rather successful over the first half of her two-week assignment; as far as the ship's total complement was concerned, the Spectre only needed to identify eight more of the twenty-four personnel, other than herself, of course – a second Combat Systems Operator, two Defensive Systems Operators, a Doctor who was versed on multiple species and the four remaining second-squad ground team members. Her satisfaction turned quickly to consternation as she glanced at her chrono and exclaimed in surprise, "Shit!"

Wondering why Liara hadn't called to tell her she was late for their daily workout together had her curious. She closed down her system and practically jogged down the hall and up the stairs to their room to get into her armor skins. She was surprised to see Liara's gear still in their private armor locker as well, so stopped short.

{Li? We working out today?}

{Oh, Goddess. I'm so sorry, Shepard! I'll be right up to get dressed... I hope you haven't been waiting long!}

The captain laughed out loud as she started to pull on her protective under layer.

{Just arrived in our quarters myself, Blue. Got caught up in sending out the final notices for some of the crew selections and chatting with Hackett. Without Joker around to pipe announcements to me, I lost track of time... I guess I need to start setting reminder alarms.}

Liara chuckled, her quiet humor rolling through the link with the thoughts she sent Shepard's way.

{We're not on station in Vancouver or aboard ship anymore, Samantha. It's our room, not our quarters, if you please.}

A moment later, the Spectre's heart swelled and she found herself smiling lovingly at Liara as she walked through the doorway. Shepard's green eyes sparkled at the welcome reminder of no longer being in the Alliance military as she answered, "You are correct, of course. I'll try to remember to call it our bedroom instead of our berth... but you'll need to forgive me for sixteen years of habit."

With the normal seductive sway in her hips that the Spectre never tired of watching, the Asari sauntered over to wrap her arms enticingly around her Guard Captain's shoulders. "I suppose if you can tolerate me getting so caught up in our bonding preparations that I forgot our appointment, I can..."
forgive you for calling our bedroom our quarters... especially since we'll be aboard the Knight Shade before we know it, and you'll fall right back into the habit again." Her mouth quivering as she attempted to fight off a grin, she leaned in and placed a tender kiss on Shepard's warm, willing lips.

Shepard enjoyed the caress of her Ioniiin Álainn's lips for a long moment before groaning and reluctantly pushing Liara away. "However tempting you are... this is not a date and that is not the kind of workout we are scheduled for at the moment, T'Soni."

Liara laughed and pulled back, dragging fingers teasingly up Shepard's neck and along the edge of her jaw. "Understood, Captain, but remember it as a promise... for when our day is done."

Smirking, Shepard picked up her armor bag and slung it over her shoulder. "Come on, pokey. Bonding prep or not, Livos is probably down there tapping her foot impatiently, wondering if we're coming or if we've become otherwise engaged... again... as you were trying so hard to entice me to do."

Liara's face now held a wide grin as she also bent over and grabbed her armor bag. "If you thought I was working hard at that, you don't know what proper enticement is, Captain."

A sharp bark of laughter preceded Shepard's response. "In that case, perhaps you need to expand upon my education, Doctor T'Soni." The Human grinned as she opened the door for her Promised, motioning with a wave of her arm for the lady of the house to lead the way into the hallway. "Later."

"I could, perhaps." The Asari grinned wickedly. "But then... we'd never get anything else done."

Livos was less than pleased with their late arrival and made sure they knew it... So, after a rather strenuous workout, the tired couple took a long, soothing soak in their private spa, hidden away in the corner of their bedroom suite. Liara finally sighed. "I suppose we have to get dressed and get downstairs... before we have others besides Livos angry with us."

Shepard actually chuckled. "Yes. Livos is one thing... but Shi and the Matriarchs might be more than even we can handle."

Once dressed and heading down the steps for their first meeting with Aethyta and Sha’ira as their bonding coaches, Shepard grumbled, "I still don't understand why I'm paired with your father for this. Shouldn't she be your mentor?"

Absolutely horrified at the question, Liara focused on her Promised. "Goddess, Shepard! You can't seriously think I have even the remotest desire to speak with my father about the intimate details of my... our... sex life, much less to show her through a meld!"

Feeling pretty much the same way, Shepard could do nothing but smile understandingly at Liara's reaction, feeling the need to explain herself to the now indignant Asari. "Which is exactly the same way I feel, Liara. At least I've melded with her before... when she helped me with my nightmares in the hospital... so she's not a total stranger to my mind." Shepard let out a resigned sigh at the memory, prompting Liara to reach over and tightly grasp the woman's hand.

"I am so sorry, Samantha." Liara's brow wrinkled with disquiet at the sensations and emotions being exchanged via their link. "I did not intend to prompt the recall of such memories."

"It's okay, A Grá. I understand." Shepard shrugged. "It's something Aethyta and I will have to work out between the two of us."
"Just what, exactly, do we need to work out, Shepard?" Catching them off-guard, the unexpected sound of Aethyta's gravelly voice sounded like nails on a chalkboard to the surprised couple.

"Shit, Aethyta!" Shepard's head snapped around to see the matriarch leaning casually against the wall. "I thought you'd be chatting with Mozia and Sha'ira! You lying in wait for us or what?"

Laughing, the matriarch pushed off from the wall and joined them as they continued down the hallway toward the private sitting room where the others were already waiting. Smirking with wicked enjoyment, she responded, "Just making sure you two didn't get distracted and not show up at all... like to Livos' practice session yesterday."

"You know damned well we made the practice today..." As Liara turned a darker shade of blue, Shepard scoffed, "But, that comment helps me understand exactly why Liara is so against you being her coach for this process!"

Another gravelly laugh was followed quickly by, "Well, she's right about that. I'm not known for my discretion and there are simply some things I definitely should not know about my daughter. I'll be honest... I'll probably see a lot of it from your perspective anyway, but it will save Liara the embarrassment of sharing any of it with me directly. I'm ok with that, actually." She paused for a moment before adding, "Besides. You need the father perspective, since that's the role you'll be undertaking... and I screwed up a lot of things in the past." She cast a glance at Liara as she continued, "The best thing I can do during this process is help you to not make the same mistakes I did, with you being gone so frequently on Spectre missions and such."

Liara raised a brow marking at her father's comment. "Do you not realize that I am remaining on her Spectre crew, Father?" At the unhappy surprise that immediately showed on the matriarch's face, Liara pushed ahead. "I'm barely 111 years old; a long way from being a matron, much less a matriarch! I intend to keep Matriarch Mozia in our employ for as long as she'll stay... hopefully, at least, until I become a matron." Liara frowned. "We have already spoken of this... I'm surprised she hasn't said something to you."

"Ah..." Aethyta huffed in disgruntled understanding. "That explains a few things. I guess she wanted me to hear it from you, which is reasonable. But you're home now... and it is no longer Mozia's place to handle such matters, whether you're a matron yet or not." The matriarch turned and gripped Liara firmly by the arm, ensuring she had her daughter's full attention. Her next words were unexpectedly insensitive. "After all... Whether you like the title or not, you are Lady T'Soni, so you'd better get used to it."

Yanking her arm away, an expression of anger flashed across the younger Asari's face. Shepard stepped closer, attempting to wrap a supportive arm around her troubled Ionún Álainn's waist – only to have the gesture rebuffed as Liara retorted heatedly, "I'll accept that title when it is forced upon me by outsiders, as I have little control over what they think or say. But, I would expect those within this House... particularly you, Father... to understand why being called such still wounds me... deeply." She growled, "Another reason why you shouldn't be my coach... seeing as your enjoyment of teasing and tormenting me seems to frequently extend well past that which is acceptable!"

"Enough! Both of you!" Having heard the fiery exchange, Mozia stood in the doorway of the sitting room, frowning at them as concern flittered across her brow. She could only hope Liara's return to the house would not put her in an awkward position between her lover and the young maiden, as both Aethyta's daughter and the leader of House T'Soni. Mozia's position as Regent would quickly become untenable if their actions forced her to pick between one or the other; she knew it would be a most difficult choice, indeed – one she had no intention of having to make.

Once their eyes had all turned toward her, she continued in a harsh and obviously disapproving tone,
"She's right, Aethyta. You know better... or should, in any case. First off, you are well aware of Benezia’s frequent trips... and that the house stewards ran things perfectly fine during her often extended absences." She gave a brisk nod of acknowledgement and approval to Liara before adding, "It was not unusual for Benezia to leave an agent in her stead while she attended to other business."

Ashamed, Aethyta refused to meet her eyes and the Regent was unrelenting. "Second, to top it all off, you are well aware of your daughter's interim request to be called Lady Liara... so, as her father, you should grant her that kindness... at the very least until she has had a chance to properly mourn the loss of her mother." Mozia's eyes narrowed briefly before she continued, unabated, "Also, as you so adamantly felt the need to point out, she is the leader of House T'Soni... and, even though she is also your daughter, you will respect her position accordingly, as tradition demands. Is that perfectly clear?"

The expression on the face of the normally unyielding and unrepentant Aethyta had turned to chagrin. "Damn it, Moz. You're right." Turning to Liara, she apologized quietly. "I'm sorry, Liara. I do know better... and Nezzie's passing still pains me as well... But, that is no reason to take out my frustration on you... especially after the last hundred years and how willingly you accepted me back into your life. For that alone, you certainly deserve better from me."

A single tear trailed down Liara's left cheek as she reached out hesitantly to take her father's hand. "Mother loved you... and I have yet to truly get to know you. I spoke from my own pain, so I understand yours only too well." She forced a small smile onto her face and continued, "So I guess we deserve one another and simply have to figure out a way to get through this... together." She glanced ruefully to the side and wrapped her other arm around Shepard as she continued, "And that includes with Samantha... so please be kind to her during this process. We all need a bit of tender understanding in the wake of all that has transpired over the past few years."

Mozia cleared her throat. "That we do, Liara... and it begins now. Sha’ira is waiting, very patiently I might add, for you to enter and begin this first session."

It was later that evening when Shepard entered the bedroom, momentarily stopping just inside the doorway to observe Liara. It had been an exhausting day and the corner of her eyes crinkled as a smile gradually crept silently her lips. The Asari was sitting quietly at their small desk in the corner, fingers hovering over the haptic interface. Her *Iónúin Álainn*’s eyes... as well as her mind... were quite obviously focused elsewhere, oblivious to Shepard's entrance or the words of whatever message she had previously started on the screen. Shepard reached out with her mind and gave her *amantia* a soft, mental bump, warning of her presence so as to not startle the distracted maiden.

Liara turned toward the entry, a troubled smile on her face as she stood from her chair. "Siame."

Samantha walked over and took blue hands in her own, setting their foreheads lovingly together. "Where were you?" At Liara's puzzled look, she explained, "You obviously weren't working on whatever was on your screen. Your mind was somewhere else entirely... and I couldn't sense where. Did your session with Sha’ira go alright?"

"I was revisiting our earlier conversation with my father." Liara's eyes reflected the grief that suddenly surged through the link and her voice hitched as she said, "And Mozia's comment about giving me time to properly mourn my mother's death."

"Oh, Li." Shepard shifted position to wrap her arms around the shaking Liara and draw her close, the Asari's warm tears tickling her neck as they escaped from closed blue eyes. After a long
moment, Samantha whispered, "I've been thinking about this for quite a while and I suppose the time has come to tell you." She drew a deep breath as her hands affectionately massaged the back of her Ionúin Álainn. "I've been tossing around an idea for a monument... It can be as big or as small as you feel appropriate and could be easily placed somewhere in the gardens... somewhere your mother loved." She drew back just enough to look Liara in the face and to gently brush away the tears still sitting on the Asari's cheeks. "Let me show you?"

Following a barely perceptible nod, Shepard keyed her omnitool, though Liara received a flash through the link of what Samantha was planning, long before the holographic image appeared in the room. A carved pillar of white marble in the shape of a flaming torch rapidly appeared before them. She could see an inscription on the wide, rectangular base but Liara hesitated before stepping closer, almost fearing to read the words... as if that simple act would bring a very much unwanted finality to her mother's death.

{With her last breath, she fought to bring light to the darkness.} The words passed through her mind as she dropped slowly to her knees, forgetting it was nothing but a hologram as she stretched out her hand to run her fingers softly along the inscription. Tears trickled anew down her face as a painful, devastating sadness stabbed into her heart. "Goddess, Siame. The words are perfect; it will be a fitting tribute... not only for her last moments, but for what she stood for her entire life." She turned a tear-streaked face upward as she whispered, "Thank you."

As the young Asari's eyes returned to the projection, a compassionate Shepard sank slowly to the floor beside her loved one. The burden she carried over the matriarch's death eased... however slightly... with Liara's acceptance of the sculpture as an appropriate honor for one loved as much as Matriarch Benezia T'Soni had been by all her family and followers. Even through her own pain, Liara sensed Sam's feelings of guilt and reached over to lay a hand softly on Shepard's thigh, giving it a gentle caress. "Do not dwell on the past, Samantha. My mother recognized she had become a tool of Sovereign and knew you could not save her... Neither do I believe she wanted you to try. You gave her a chance to help... and to then say goodbye before you released her from a future filled with torment."

Sliding slightly to the side so she was no longer resting on her knees, Samantha leaned into Liara and sighed softly. "I know, Blue... but that knowledge doesn't make it any easier to accept." She had to swallow the lump in her throat before she could continue, "I'm just glad you approve of the monument." She placed a hand atop the blue one absentely traveling her thigh, pinning it in place. "Now you need to decide how big... so we can get it commissioned... and where you want to place it."

"That is not difficult. For all her wisdom and accomplishments, my mother never desired to receive accolades or attention. Her idea of the perfect reward was simply that those she helped become better people and not waste the gifts the Goddess had bestowed upon them." Liara stood slowly, her eyes never leaving the small memorial. "I believe the projection is a perfect size, coming only as high as our waists. As for the location... my mother's favorite color was yellow; it is my turn to show you something."

The Asari's lips curled into a tepid smile and she reached out a searching hand; Samantha answered in kind, her hand providing a warm comfort to the Asari as they made their way outside and through the gardens. They rounded a final corner and cleared one last shrub row before entering a garden filled with flowers – all of which bloomed in some shade of yellow.

A small circular bench sat in the center of it all and Liara guided their feet toward it as she once again started to speak. "This bench was one of my mother's favorite places; she would come here to meditate over issues that had her stymied." The young Asari's eyes came alive with the memories
that she promptly shared through their link as she sat reverently on the bench, pulling Shepard down alongside her as she continued, "I would find her here and climb upon her lap... to pester her until she told me the basics of what was bothering her." She let out a little laugh that contained both pleasure and pain at her recollections from those days long past. "My mother frequently said I was her inspiration... that simply telling me the story and explaining the problem often helped her to find the solution."

"I can see that." Shepard smiled softly and gently squeezed the hand still within her own.
"Sometimes, that's all it takes. Trying to find the words to explain something helps to see the whole picture better. My mother used to do that to me... to encourage me to find my own answers and to not rely on her or Dad to give them to me."

"So... you understand." Liara pulled her hand away and stood back up, pointing at the bench. "The monument should be placed in the center of the garden, replacing the bench... with a new set of benches to circle the outer edge of the courtyard." She quickly measured the size of the clearing with her eyes. "Only four or five, I believe, so as to not be too cluttered. Yes. Four. One centered on each of the cardinal directions." Her loving gaze returned to her Promised. "What do you think?"

"I think it's perfect, Liara, though we can't get rid of your mother's favorite bench... We'll give it a new home that is still on the Estate grounds." Samantha answered quietly, an affectionate smile on her face as she looked up at her Ionúin Álainn. "And, though I honestly have nothing to base it on, I'm pretty sure your mother would approve."
Some Assembly Required

Chapter Notes

A Grá - My Love (Gaelic)

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

Grá mo chroí - love of my heart (Gaelic)

Gráim thú - I love you (Gaelic)

Ionúin Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Kaffe - equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

SILC - Synthetic Intelligence Life Codes (previously known as Geth)

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 23 Jun 2188

Shepard glanced around, realizing the garden lights were beginning to turn off, and rose from the bench. "Come on, Li. It's way past our bedtime and if we wait too much longer, we'll still be standing out here when the sun rises."

"I would be okay with us watching the sun rise, actually..." Liara laughed quietly. "But I guarantee the commandos know exactly where we are and I would venture a guess that a very tired Riana isn't far away... nor is Livos. We've likely kept them up all night with us." Looking around, she shrugged. "They are simply respecting our privacy while staying close enough to aid or protect us... should either become necessary. All part of being a key member of the family of a great house, Samantha."

"Be that as it may, I really think we should head in and let them get to bed. Don't you?"

The Asari responded by wrapping a loving hand around the back of her neck to pull her close, accompanied by a long, passionate kiss, followed by a whisper meant for Shepard's ears alone. "I think you simply want me to make good on my promise from earlier... unless, of course, you're no longer interested."

Shepard stood in stunned silence for a moment, eyes closed as she ran her tongue around, still tasting the Asari on her lips. She shook herself back to reality and opened her eyes to stare directly into the exhausted blue orbs of her lover, mere centimeters from her own. The Spectre suddenly remembered one particular night on the Normandy, when Liara had asked her to make love to her for the first time. It made her recognize Liara's need to feel connected; it was the way she chose to deal with loss and Shepard could not... would not... intentionally deny her that union, no matter how exhausted she may be. "I, uhm... yeah. Yes! Let there be no misunderstanding; I am most definitely interested,
Doctor T'Soni."

Thinking both of them were much too tired to honestly do anything but sleep, Shepard was pleasantly surprised when Liara smiled and then spoke into the air, knowing someone was listening, even if they couldn't be positive who it was. "Please leave a note for Steward Raptos to postpone our morning appointments until later today. The captain and I have... some things to attend to... and we need a good night's sleep before attacking tomorrow... or today, as is honestly the case."

Hidden in the early morning shadows of the hedges, Riana smiled sadly, her own heart aching as memories of the once benevolent matriarch's life and death passed through her mind, inseparable from certain other memories... particularly of Ryati. She trailed the couple until they were safely within the house... then, Riana sent a quick message to Lyessa advising her of the late night's events before returning to her own room, to finally slip into bed to softly embrace a soundly sleeping Samantha Traynor. It is good to let go of the past... so that all of us may look to the future.

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That afternoon, Shepard was using Liara's office when a welcome call came in. "I've found someone for you, Sam – a 42 year old doctor with extensive war experience... he should be the perfect trauma surgeon for your team " Karin smiled at the woman over the vid chat. "His name is Derek Yandle and before the war, he worked with a company called Global Disaster Response; once the Reapers hit, he operated a mobile trauma facility for the Resistance..." Her smile faded as she continued, "He frequently worked with Admiral Anderson, Sam; he and David became good friends."

Shepard stared at the screen as an unexpected rock materialized painfully in the middle of her chest, making it difficult to breathe – never mind being able to speak. The startling surge of sorrow forced her to look away from the screen for a moment in order to draw a deep breath and settle her emotions. Despite her best efforts to the contrary, her eyes misted over, making her blink to clear her vision; even though the man had been gone for over a year, it seemed like things kept popping up to keep the painful memory of his passing fresh in her mind. Looking back to the screen, she responded quietly, "I still miss him, Aunt Karin. A day doesn't go by that I don't expect him to call me and ask what the Hell I've been up to and why I haven't stayed in touch with him."

"I know, Sam... We all do. David was a good man." Karin paused for several moments before continuing. "Have you talked to Kahlee at all?"

With that question, Shepard's mood brightened considerably. "Yes, I have... and she's getting leave time to come to the bonding, so she'll be flying in the day before. I think she's hoping to hitch a ride with you guys aboard the Normandy..." The captain chuckled quietly. "Seeing as Ashley intends to bring the whole damned ship."

"I'm afraid Kahlee will end up taking a shuttle, Sam... we're on duty out on the Rim and have limited time to get there and back, so I seriously doubt we can afford any additional detours... However, you know none of us would miss your and Liara's bonding ceremony for anything! Did you honestly expect anything else? The crew on this ship are devoted to you, Samantha; you and Liara, both! You guided us through the war and pulled us along with you out this side of Hell." Karin's face held an expression of doting admiration. "We're all proud of you."

"Yeah, yeah," Shepard smirked as she blushed slightly. "Enough of that. Save it for the annual Victory Celebrations." Shepard shook her head and smiled, refocusing on the subject at hand. "So... Tell me about this trauma surgeon of yours."

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After the call from Karin, Shepard sat down at her message terminal, her inbox overflowing with new messages. Grumbling at the volume, she glanced down the list of senders; her brow wrinkled at an unexpected message from Matriarch Lidanya, commanding officer of the Destiny Ascension. Knowing Lyessa’s bondmate served as an engineer aboard the super-dreadnaught, Shepard opened it immediately... fervently hoping nothing untoward had happened. She couldn't imagine why Lidanya would be contacting her instead of Liara, or better yet Lyessa, directly. She breathed a welcome sigh of relief as she read the contents.

Captain Shepard. I know this message will likely come as a surprise, but I heard from Selina T’Rori, my lead engineer and bondmate of Lyessa Raptos, that you are looking for a Combat Systems Operator. I will waste neither my words nor your time. We all owe you our lives and, as such, I would like to offer you one of my best. Ellia Stegos is due to rotate back to the Asari Fleet next month, and it would be my distinct honor to release her early if you would accept her as crew aboard the Knight Shade. She is thrilled at being given this opportunity and, if you say yes, she will have her bags packed and ride out on the next available shuttle after we receive your affirmative reply. Her credentials and résumé are attached. Respectfully, Matriarch Lidanya, Commander, Destiny Ascension.

Eyebrows arched in pleasant surprise at such an offer, Shepard opened the attachments and reviewed them, quickly checking off yet another position aboard the new Spectre vessel as having been filled. She responded to Lidanya, thanking her for the services of Stegos, and continued through her message queue. She was astonished to find a number of similar messages from various acquaintances; Councilor Valern offered her Salaeto Le’edi, a highly qualified Defensive Systems Operator, and a Quarian Marine by the name of Len’Dazza had also applied. He claimed to have worked with Kal’Reegar, so Shepard placed a quick call to Tali, who was currently working aboard the ship to fine tune the Knight Shade’s thruster performance.

"Absolutely, Shepard. Len is a superb operator and a solid Marine; as good in a melee as he is behind a control panel. I'd trust him with my life on any given day. Keelah! It would be good to have him at my side... but I have to wonder why he would leave the Marines. Be sure to ask him that before you accept him for the position."

"I'll do that Tali. Thanks.” Shepard terminated the omnitool call and opened her desktop comm system for a second time, using the rather obscure contact routing information included in Dazza’s application. The call was answered immediately by a voice full of challenge.

"Len’Dazza vas Neema... Your origin identifier is veiled." His tone changed to one of suspicion as he queried, "Who is this?"

"Spectre Shepard." The hackles on the back of Shepard’s neck had risen when she heard the ship assignment. "I'm responding to your application... vas Neema?"

"Thank the ancestors!” he exclaimed, his voice suddenly full of relief. "Yes, unfortunately; vas Neema... And, I assume, that is reason enough to explain both why I want out of my current assignment and why your voice sounds as suspicious to me as mine likely did to you."

"Yes; that ship name carries implications that do concern me. Where are you?” Shepard wondered about the relief in his voice and why he sounded so free to speak as he did.

"I'm on a solo reconnaissance mission; there is no one with me to overhear anything we say... but if anyone from the Neema figures out what I'm doing, I'm as good as dead. I'm currently parked on an
asteroid orbiting Ammut in the Ma-at System and the SILC are well aware of my presence. They actually helped me send my application to you in such a way that the Neema would be unaware.” He paused only briefly before blurtling out, ”Gerrel and Xen are scheming to re-enslave the Geth, Shepard. If that happens, they will destroy everything the Quarians have achieved since you found us during the war... and I refuse to be a part of it!”

"How much do you know about their plans?” Shepard was sure her voice reflected the surprise she felt at the Quarian's unexpected outburst.

"Not much, I'm afraid. Gerrel and Xen lock themselves away and when they emerge? They simply hand out orders to unfortunate soldiers like me who happened to be assigned to one of their ships when they defected... and we are expected to simply follow their orders; no questions asked, no talking to anyone about our particular assignments, and no chatting about what we did or what we found once we get back. Those who do open their mouths to complain or compare notes seem to be sent off on their next assignment just like everyone else... only they never return. These two Admirals are very successfully instilling obedience through fear.”

Getting their first break on the mysterious disappearance of the two admirals, Shepard couldn't refrain from asking, "So, where are they hiding?"

"The Neema?” Dazza was caught off-guard by the question, but just as quickly realized that he shouldn't have been and answered promptly. "She and the Moreh are parked on Sidacha, one of a trio of moons surrounding Trigestis in the Chomos System. The smaller ships who left with them are scattered throughout the system, either parked on the other moons or circling the planet, disguised within the debris of its surrounding ring. Xen has devised some sort of scrambler shield, making it almost impossible to find them by accident. You have to be running a pretty tight scan to pick up any of their signatures."

"Damn it.” Shepard blew out a frustrated breath before continuing, "So I assume you have a plan of your own to defect if I agree to take you on?"

"If you say yes, it's not a defection, Spectre Shepard. It's an escape from a ship controlled by traitors to the Quarian people, after which I will happily subject myself to any type of questioning you, the other admirals, or the Council deems necessary so that I may be free to join your crew... assuming you'll have me. Either way... I want out of the mess I've found myself in. Honestly, I would rather spend the rest of my life in prison than continue to aid in their mad schemes."

"Once you get away from the Neema, you could simply return to the Fleet... You must have other reasons for wanting to join my crew, other than to get yourself out of a bad situation."

"Yes, I do, Captain... personal reasons which I am happy to share with you, under the circumstances. Kal'Reegar was a very good friend of mine and he once asked me if I would watch over Tali should anything befall him during the war. With her joining your crew, that task has actually become unnecessary... as I don't believe Tali could be any more secure than she is while working with you, Spectre Shepard. But... in honor of Kal, I still wish to fulfill the obligation I took on that day.” He sighed heavily. "Tali'Zorah vas Normandy was the love of his life and I was like a brother to Kal. I... I really need to be at her side to make sure she remains safe... and, perhaps, to ease her isolation from the Fleet by having another Quarian by her side."

"Tali vouched for you, so I believe you have yourself a deal, Dazza… which brings me back to my earlier question. Do you have a plan for your escape?”

"Absolutely. The SILC will 'discover' and destroy my scout ship, presumably killing or capturing me in the process. I will be smuggled aboard a cargo ship delivering the last of the materials required
for the completion of the housing units aboard the CGC. Gerrel will figure out the truth soon enough, but not before I am already well on my way to the Serpent Nebula and it is impossible for him to intercept me without putting their own plans at risk."

"In that case, House T'Soni will have a shuttle there, awaiting your arrival. Send me the details and you'll never have to leave the docks; you'll transfer quickly and quietly to the T'Soni ship to be brought to Thessia... where you'll rendezvous with us at the Estate." Shepard pursed her lips and, after a moment of thought, continued, "Adding you, we'll have at least four dextro-based crew so, if you need to limit what you carry, you don't need to bring any dextro supplies with you. Otherwise, feel free to bring what you have to supplement our stores. Sound good?"

"Sounds excellent, Captain. You have no idea what this means to me." Pure relief flooded through Len's tone as he answered. "While Tali'Zorah may have vouched for me, she also spoke very highly of you when we were together with Kal. I very much look forward to finally meeting you in person, Spectre."

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 25 Jun 2188

It was obvious the word had gotten out that Shepard was putting together a new Spectre crew and over the next few days a number of offers rolled in from various sources, providing her with many qualified personnel to choose from. Her next addition to the crew was a Salarian Engineer recommended by Major Kirrahe. Captain Daeto Telas had been in the STG for seven years and had advanced to become a level 5 Operative. On a small squad, the ability to draw fire from the main force with the use of a decoy was a bonus, as the Spectre had witnessed on numerous occasions with Edi. Telas' skill set and battle experience were also rather impressive, so Shepard was happy to add the Salarian to the team.

Next, she received a surprise call from Bray and Nyreen, telling her about an Enforcer... a rare Batarian Adept... who was a brother to Anto, one of Aria's most trusted bodyguards. With his usual gruff approach, Bray growled out, "His name is Bek Korragan and his talents are almost completely wasted with all the Asari swarming this place." Bray then chuckled, "Not that you don't have the same advantage there on Thessia, but he's good with a warp and has that damned biotic lash down to an art."

Nyreen cut in abruptly to add, "The truth of the matter is that Aria still feels obligated to you for some reason. I've never seen her act like this toward anyone ever before, but if she's willing to part with Bek, I'd take her up on the offer before she changes her mind, Shepard."

"I trust the judgment of both of you enough that I'm willing to give him a chance." Shepard shook her head in disbelief. "Honestly, I never would have considered selecting a Batarian for my squad, but you two... along with all your troops on Omega... proved to be both capable and loyal, so I'll take you up on the offer. My thanks to both of you." She grinned at Bray and Nyreen as she concluded, "Please convey my gratitude to Aria as well."

Harley Creath walked into her office as Nyreen replied that she'd pass the Spectre's thanks on to Aria and terminated the call. He respectfully waited until the screen went completely dark and Shepard indicated he could sit. "We're a lot less formal than the Alliance, Harley. What do you need?"

He casually tossed a datapad onto her desk before unceremoniously dropping down into the chair Shepard had indicated. "I've been looking for this woman for quite some time in order to bring her onto my N7 squad. Last known location was on a security team out in the Terminus... New Canton. Not too far from Ferris Fields, actually. She was a paid mercenary when I knew her, and she is one
Hell of a shot with that sniper rifle of hers. She uses a charged Batarian Kishock Harpoon Gun... and she's quite deadly."

Shepard looked the data over. "And just how am I supposed to locate this... Minda Tilghman... if you've been looking and haven't been able to find her?"

Harley shrugged and smiled knowingly. "Because you've got Spectre access and the best Information Broker in the galaxy at your disposal. If anyone can find her, you can... and I promise that once you do, she'll be worth whatever effort you have to put into the search."

The Spectre nodded. "Alright. I'll give it to Liara and see what she turns up... but we've only got a few days before the full crew roster is due to the Council, so we'll need a backup, just in case."

Harley got up from his chair as he replied, "Understood, Captain. If Dr T'Soni can't find her right away I can always bring over my old N7 team sniper, Louis Brazile, as a temporary fill until we find her. He's good... but she's better."

It was the day before the ship's roster was supposed to be finalized and Shepard was still short an infiltrator for Jatok's team. She was prepared to fill the position with one of the commandos from the Estate when her solution came from a most unlikely source – a female Drell simply showed up at the gates, stating that she absolutely had to speak with Spectre Shepard. "Please inform her that Kolyat Krios sends his regards."

Upon hearing the familiar name, Shepard asked that she be brought to her office immediately, under guard until her intentions were known. [Liara? Are you listening to this?]

(I am, Love. I am contacting Kolyat as we speak. Stay on your guard, please, until I can confirm whether she is friend or foe.)

The Drell was escorted to Shepard's office by both Livos and Jatok, the latter giving a sharp rap on the door frame to indicate they had arrived. Shepard stood from her chair, remaining behind her desk to greet her unexpected visitor, who bowed to the Human immediately upon entering the room.

"Kolyat sends good tidings, Spectre, and congratulates you on your... independence... from the Systems Alliance."

"Why has Kolyat sent you instead of contacting me himself?" asked Shepard. "Has something happened to him? Does he require assistance of some kind?"

The Drell laughed softly. "On the contrary, Spectre. He has sent me to help you, in whatever capacity you may need. I am Kaddi Finnoa, an Assassin Infiltrator initially trained under the Compact, and Kolyat was led to believe you have such a vacancy on the crew roster of your new vessel, the Knight Shade. Like Kolyat's father before me, I am here to end your search, Captain Shepard, assuming the position is still available."

Shepard cocked her head in puzzlement. "First off, how does he know that... and second, why would he, or you for that matter, do such a thing?"

"As for how he was aware of your predicament, the knowledge of your search for people to crew your new vessel is not exactly a secret. As for the why, you would need to speak with him directly... I did not waste time questioning his motives." Kaddi closed her eyes momentarily before stating, "Kolyat guided my spirit through a time of great darkness for me; but the fact that I owe him for that is merely an excuse. No matter his reasons for sending me here, as a trained infiltrator, it would be my honor to serve with you aboard the Knight Shade, Spectre."
She checks out, Samantha... I just finished my chat with Kolyat. He says we would be doing her a favor by giving purpose to her life, much as you did with Thane during his final days. He does warn us however, that Kaddi is not afflicted with Kepral's Syndrome and if we select her, we just may be stuck with her for a while, as she is extremely loyal... and relatively young.) Humor rolled through the link, accompanied by Liara's quiet chuckle. (I got the distinct impression that he is the one who needs her to have something else to occupy her time... He says she can become very doting and overprotective of those she cares for.)

"Alright." Shepard pushed a quick thanks through the link to Liara and held out her hand to the Drell. "I'm willing to give you a temporary position... for Kolyat and for Thane's memory... to see if you are a compatible addition to the team. But, you won't be working for me, directly; you'll be on Second Team, working for the Krogan Commander standing beside you, Hailot Jatok. Are you willing to do that?"

Kaddi reached out and gripped Shepard's hand in acceptance. "Of course, Captain." She turned to the Krogan and queried, "When do we start?"

Laughing, the Spectre shook her head. "Come on. We'll show you the ship and introduce you to the whole crew. Welcome aboard, Specialist Finnoa."

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T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 27 Jun 2188

On her final Friday morning of Spectre duty before her vacation break, Shepard woke slowly and stretched, Liara grumbling at the disturbance and attempting to still the moving form so she could continue to use the Human as her body pillow. Shepard relaxed and her lips curled into a loving smile as she ran her fingers softly across the Asari's pebbled skin, content to simply lie there and soothingly caress the body she held so dearly in her arms. After a bit, the sun started to peek in the window so Shepard tipped her head and brushed her lips across Liara's crest before whispering, "Time to get up, Blue. We still have a bit of work left to finish up today... then, I'm all yours for the duration."

Humming in satisfaction, Liara mumbled quietly, "You're mine for the duration no matter what, Captain Shepard; you promised."

Shepard's heart swelled as she felt the tickle of the Asari's smiling lips curl against her shoulder and she laughed lightly. "That I did, A Grá..." Shepard pushed herself up and kissed Liara's cheek before continuing, "... but that does not include staying in bed and missing breakfast, especially when I have my third session with your father this afternoon."

"Ugh." Liara groaned as she pushed her reluctant body into a sitting position as well. "That's right... Those are today, aren't they?" She swung her legs off the side of the bed and stood, stretching her arms toward the ceiling and placing her extremely attractive form on full display before Samantha.

"Damn, Liara... You finally wake up and then you do that... making me wish you were still in bed." Shepard climbed out to follow and wrapped her arms around her lover's waist; pulling their warm bodies together again somehow brought a sense that all was right in the world and that the day's challenges would be conquered with ease. While nestling into the comforting crook of a blue neck and shoulder, Shepard took a deep breath of eezo and Thessian Rose before whispering, "Gráim thú, Grá mo chroí."

In response, Liara slid her hands across the tops of Shepard's hips to wrap around her torso until they
found the dimples of the Human's lower back, just above her rather shapely ass. Shepard groaned in pleasure as fingers glowing faintly with biotics spread across her back, reveling in her lover's impromptu massage. Liara slowly worked her way up Samantha's back muscles as Shepard mumbling contentedly into the Asari's neck. "Gods, Liara. Your fingers are pure magic... That feels absolutely wonderful."

Feeling Samantha's body melt against her own, accompanied by warm sensations of affection and love filling her mind through the link, Liara answered with a soft sigh. "It does, doesn't it." She crossed her arms across the woman's upper back and hugged her tightly as the utter devotion she felt toward Samantha surged back through the link in response. "I love you too, Siame, more than I ever dreamed possible; thank you for giving me the courage to love so deeply. It is a rare gift to feel safe and secure enough that one can love so... unconditionally... as I do you."

As the Asari's grip on her heart tightened even more, Shepard pulled back to observe the contented expression dominating the Asari's features. She gently cupped Liara's face and used her thumb to caress a soft blue cheek, puffed full by a radiant smile that lit her passion afire. The woman placed her lips tenderly upon those of her Ioniún Álainn and they kissed, only briefly, before the captain pulled back and, in a voice edged with desire, asked, "Join me in the shower?"

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Lyessa smiled knowingly when the couple finally made it downstairs for breakfast, seeing the contented glow in Liara's eyes and the relaxed satisfaction in the way Shepard carried herself. It immediately made her think of her own bondmate and she smiled longingly, knowing she would soon have Selina home for two weeks of vacation time, as she was returning to Thessia for Liara and Shepard's upcoming bonding. The House Steward was still smiling when she greeted them. "Good morning, you two. There is fresh Kaffe in the kitchen and Leyana will be more than happy to cook you something hot if you like... but, with it being so warm, most of us simply had toast and fruit this morning."

"Sounds okay to me," Shepard answered, a gentle smile on her face. "I think we're going to eat out on the veranda... because you're right; it's a beautiful morning."

As they strolled into the kitchen, Leyana welcomed them with a bit of a smirk. "Ah, there's my last two for breakfast." She picked up a medium sized tray from the counter and lifted the dome to reveal a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich on toast accompanied by a wide variety of fruits and dips. "I'll let you pour your own drinks... there is Kaffe and any number of juices to choose from. Do you simply want to eat at the kitchen bar or do you want to go to the dining room this morning?"

Shepard's eyes had lit with eagerness when she saw what was under the lid of the tray and she responded quickly, "Leyana? You are now my favorite chef in the galaxy!" Casting an accusatory glance at her Promised, Shepard asked, "How could you possibly know about my love for BLTs?"

Seeing the look between the two, Leyana laughed softly. "Yes, it was Lady Liara who told me it was one of your favorite breakfast foods... and that you were rarely able to get all the ingredients during your travels. I placed a special order and they arrived in yesterday's Terran shipment, so I thought I would surprise you. I can reheat it, if that would be better?"

"Nope!" Shepard's joyful expression didn't even begin to fade as she answered. "It will taste just as awesome... and to answer your question, we'd like to eat on the kitchen veranda so we can enjoy our crystal-clear morning, if that's alright?"

"Oh!" Leyana turned around and headed in the opposite direction. "What a wonderful choice! I agree! Why eat inside when you can enjoy the out of doors, particularly when it is so gorgeous
As they ate breakfast, Shepard and Liara reviewed the final listing of crew selections and saw no reason to change any of them. With her usual efficiency, Liara had managed to locate Minda Tilghman; the woman was currently on a security job and would be unavailable for the first month... but that didn't really matter, seeing as Shepard's leave period was longer than that... so they had welcomed her to the team, forwarded a contract to her and filled in the last blank on the roster.

Immediately following their morning meal, Shepard and Liara ambled to the ship together for the morning crew meeting. The announcement that the roster was complete was well received, even knowing Len'Dazza was at least two weeks out and their Team Two sniper was another two after that. "In the meantime, I want to run deployment drills." Shepard's eyes met those of Harley Creath as she continued, "We all know that time can mean lives in our business... so when we get a call, there is a very real probability that our target location needed us yesterday. For rapid deployment, we need to work efficiently as a team – which means no duplication of effort while, at the same time, we ensure no tasks are left undone and no essential equipment has been left behind."

Harley grinned. "My N7 squad did the same... though there were only six of us instead of a whole damned ship... but we could be on the shuttle and taking off in less than five minutes from when the siren blew."

"That is not possible!" The primary pilot, Lusmeni Thoni, looked at Shepard in wide-eyed alarm. "At least not from a cold start! It takes almost twenty minutes to initiate the core and bring it up to flight readiness."

Her co-pilot, Daxa Rusim, simply shrugged. "So, we never shut it down all the way unless we're down for maintenance or a mandatory rest period. That way, we can adjust the standby power level to meet any response time you need or want, Spectre."

"Alright." Shepard nodded and glanced at both Lusmeni and Daxa. "Your job the next couple of weeks will be to run different scenarios and see what the *Knight Shade* can give us. I want you to be able to tell me exactly how long before we can get this ship in the air, whatever her idle state. Understood?" With a quick nod from both she glanced at the rest of the flight crew. "That, of course, means the rest of you need to do the same with respect to your own areas of responsibility. Over the next few days... and then any and every time we land, before we do anything else... all systems need to be checked for readiness, restocked and reloaded... from weapons and ammo to medical supplies and food stores. We won't have an acquisitions officer, so all of you will be responsible for maintaining your own inventories. If there's something you can't get on the Spectre account, send a request to Liara or me – one way or another, we'll take care of it at our earliest convenience."

Smiling softly, Liara reached over and took Shepard's hand for everyone to see. "Now. You all know the two of us will be a bit busy for the next couple of weeks between now and August fifteenth, but there are plenty of hours in a day and we'll make ourselves available to you should the need arise. Even though Shepard is technically on leave, we'll be expected to be fully up and operational come the first of September... and we certainly don't plan on doing anything during our honeymoon."

Shepard chuckled softly and finished with, "That means we need to have most of this figured out before the bonding... and then we'll be back in two weeks and have the last three days of August to fine tune the details. Questions?"

Jatok grumped, "So tell us something we didn't know, Shepard. What do you think Livos and I have been doing the past two weeks? Sitting around on our asses and drinking Ryncol?"
"She knows better." Livos smiled and looked at Shepard and Liara as she said, "It would be nice to have you for more than just the afternoon workout. In the early mornings, we've been making use of the Armali Armáx. We leave here at 0515, run team drills from 0600 to 0800, and get back here by 0830 or so, before Armáx ever opens to the public at 0900 hours. Can you join us tomorrow?"

Shepard shook her head with a chuckle. "Not tomorrow. We have our mentoring sessions in the morning... As for Sunday, I'd prefer to have some time off to spend with Liara. Monday?"

Livos and Jatok gave each other a knowing glance and Shepard began to wonder exactly what they had been planning for the first full session in Armáx with her and Liara along for the ride.

"That sounds good, Captain. I'll inform Riana to make sure you are both up and ready for our 0515 departure on Monday morning."

As the two team leaders walked away, Liara cast the captain a concerned look. "Seriously? Five in the morning? What in the galaxy do they have planned?"

"I have no idea, but I think they believe we're in trouble." The Spectre laughed and wrapped an arm around Liara's waist. "We'll know come Monday morning... and I get the feeling they won't give us any clues between now and then, so there's no sense worrying about it." As she gave her Ionuín Álainn a quick squeeze, a wide smirk spread across her face. "And, whatever it is, I'm pretty sure the two of us together can kick their asses. So, how about we get back up to the office, enter our last weekly crew status report, and get it sent off so I can be a free woman?"

"That is a deal, Captain... and once we provide the Knight Shade's full crew roster to the Council, you will have met the levied requirements and will truly be on vacation." Liara smiled softly. "How shall we spend our first evening free of obligations?"

Warmth spread through the woman's body as she tightened her grip around Liara's waist. "Remember my first visit here, Li?" A playful smirk eked its way onto her lips as she continued, "If my memory serves me well, that was pretty damn close to five years ago... today." She turned and pulled the Asari tightly into her arms. "I would love to take another evening stroll with you... along the beach and under the positively entrancing Thessian moonlight."

"Goddess." With the reminder of that night that now seemed so long ago – like another lifetime – Liara felt the heat rush first to her face and then to other places and she whispered softly, "Yes, Siame. I believe that would be a most... welcome... excursion."
Politics, Priestesses and Practical Jokes

Chapter Notes

Shmex warning! Starts in the bottom third, when Shep and Liara return to T'Soni house Armali, until the next section break.

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Akantha - Popular Asari liquor renowned for its warm, smoky flavor and sweet aftertaste (Thessian)

Grá mo chroí - love of my heart (Gaelic)

Inanna: pinnacle of Asari blending, perfect unity of two spirits into one (Thessian/derived from 'real world' Sumerian Goddess of Love, Fertility, and War)

Ionúin Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Kaffe - equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

SILC - Synthetic Intelligence Life Codes (previously known as Geth)

Tá tú mo gach rud - You are my everything (Gaelic)

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 28 Jun 2188

Come late Saturday morning, Shepard found herself yet again with Aethyta... for their fourth session of the scheduled twelve, following the agreed upon timetable required to complete the last session one full month before the actual bonding ceremony. Worrying that Shepard and Liara weren't taking the process seriously enough, Aethyta wasted no time in getting started. "You kids were out late again last night... You rested enough for this?"

Shepard scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Please. I've gotten more restful sleep in the past two weeks than I did the entire nine months of the war... and probably during much of that infernal Victory Tour... maybe even more than the two combined!"

Studying Shepard's face, the matriarch had to agree that the woman did look well-rested, so answered, "I suppose that's very likely true. However, you cannot take this approval process too lightly, Shepard, because even though you believe it to be, as you so eloquently put it, an enormous pile of varren shit – a sentiment I happen to share, by the way – you simply must appreciate the need for all the preliminaries. Even if, given your position as a Spectre and Goddess-be-damned war hero, you shouldn't have any trouble receiving the blessings of Thessia's ruling matriarchs."

"I know, I know." Shepard shook her head in disgust as she continued, "There will be the select
"Inquiry, Shepard," Aethyta snorted. "A Justicar inquiry. But I guarantee you those few can, and likely will, make your life a living Hell for the hour allotted to them." Her voice lost its humor as she reached over and laid her hand atop that of the Spectre. "That said, we need to work a bit more yet on your emotional control. You can contain your anger, but you still need to better shield your... I don't even know what to call it."

"It's contempt, Aethyta," the Spectre growled. "Absolute, unrestrained contempt. Those miserable old crones will dare to sit in judgment of me after they almost cost us the entire fucking war... with their ministers trying to keep that cursed Prothean Beacon a secret... knowing damned well we needed the data it contained! Thank the Gods for Tevos and her willingness to risk her career!"

"And the Goddess." Aethyta's face held a smirk as Shepard glanced up in confusion. "Be sure to thank the Goddess for Tevos and the information she provided, Spectre. It will show you as more attuned with Asari beliefs in their eyes." Her smirk vanished as she continued, "Even if they ignore all your accomplishments over the past six years... between your biotics, the ease with which you meld and the amazing Inanna you share with Liara, they'll be hard pressed to find any realistic basis to deny your bonding. But – even knowing they will be in the minority – they may still try, in a misguided attempt to piss you off and goad you into saying something you shouldn't."

Sam thought about this for a few moments before replying in a thoughtful tone, "I can see that. They simply may be looking for the ability to claim that they voted against me, after the fact, in the futile hope that I fall out of favor with the Asari people at some point in the indefinite future... I can just imagine that anything negative I say now will then be used against me."

"Ahhh, yes, absolutely... and don't be so positive such a hope on their part is futile, Shepard." Aethyta's eyes reflected a sudden sadness, haunted by memories of the change in Benezia's attitude toward her after they had conceived Liara... or perhaps even before they had completed the procreation meld. The matriarch shook her head and continued, "For always touting themselves as such a 'long view' race, individual Asari can be rather fickle when it suits them. Remember that."

Seeing the pain that flashed across the Asari's face, Shepard could only guess at the cause... no matter how accurate her guess was, it was still a guess so, not wanting to open old wounds, she simply pressed on. "Understood, Aethyta. I'll keep that in mind. So, what's next?"

"Nothing pleasant, I'm afraid." Aethyta's brow furrowed and she moved her hand up to grip Shepard's forearm. "Telling you how horrible it can be really cannot do any justice to their worst, so I need to show you. Do you feel ready to experience the memories from my own Matriarchal Inquiry that followed Benezia's announcement of our plans to bond?"

The reticence within the matriarch's voice immediately captured Shepard's attention and the Spectre suddenly knew Aethyta was speaking earnestly... and that her experiences during the inquiry had been anything but pleasant. She sat a bit straighter in her chair and answered, "No... but if we don't do this, I won't be ready for the real ones either, so let's get it done, Aethyta." Shepard drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Whenever you're ready."

"Your withdrawal word still Excalibur, Shepard?" Receiving a nod of acknowledgement, Aethyta closed her eyes for only a brief moment before reopening them to reveal obsidian orbs. "Remember to use it if you need it. Otherwise, if you force a meld-break, we'll both have monster headaches that will incapacitate us for a couple of days minimum." The matriarch drew a deep breath and focused herself before whispering, "Embrace eternity."
By the time they were done, Shepard felt as if she had been in a head-butting competition with a Krogan Battlemaster... without the benefit of a helmet. The matriarchs, obviously angry at Benezia's 'lack of clear judgment' regarding her choice of such a crass and uncultured mate, had not been kind to Liara’s father, having done their absolute best to dissuade the irreverent Aethyta and convince her that she wanted no part of being a member of a high house. Shepard's opinions regarding the necessity of the Justicar reform became even stronger and more entrenched; the questioning of Aethyta reminded her greatly of Riana's description of her inquisition by Justicar Davos when it was discovered her sister Aresia was an Ardat-Yakshi.

Sensing Samantha's extreme distress but not understanding the cause, a very concerned Liara had raced into the room, only to slide to a stop once she realized what was happening. Completely unable to assist Shepard while the Human was engaged in a meld with her father, Liara stood by, waiting anxiously while the resolute Captain endured the remainder of Aethyta's memories of the questioning. However, as soon as the interrogation ran its course and the matriarch terminated the meld, Liara was immediately at Shepard's side to place a supporting hand on her shoulder as her promised slowly slumped forward, ending up with her head between her knees, a headache pounding so violently it was making her nauseous. The soothing touch of the Asari's hand caressing her back brought a surge of support and welcome relief from the worst of Samantha's symptoms as she worked desperately to keep her breakfast where it belonged.

Aethyta leaned back against the couch, her fingertips massaging her own temples as tears from the painful memories crept down her cheeks. "Shepard, I am so sorry; you have my sincere apologies as well, Little Wing, but Shepard needs to understand the lengths to which those who dislike the idea of your bonding can... and will... go. But, essential information or not, forcing her to live through that pain, even secondhand, is a cruel teaching method. I honestly wish that particular exchange had not been necessary."

Shepard drew a deep breath and coughed softly before sitting up, leaning against the couch’s backrest and closing her eyes. Her voice was low as she responded, "Shit, Aethyta. I believe that could be the understatement of the century." She groaned and sat more upright, opening tired eyes to see the troubled expression of her lover. "Thanks, Blue... and I'm sorry we worried you."

"Only until I understood what was happening..." Liara's gaze traveled to her father. "I never realized how much the other matriarchs truly disliked you, Dad. I saw only a shadow of the memories you just shared with Samantha... their spiteful contempt, their malevolence... it was almost frightening to witness just how... malicious... they could be!"

"That's a good word for it." Aethyta sighed. "They really wanted me to back out... to decide the whole thing really wasn't worth the fight." Her eyes suddenly lit with determination as she continued, "Love isn't always easy... but I would be damned before I gave up on your mother, Little Wing. Nezzie was the best of them all... and no two-credit, sanctimonious pile of Pyjak shit minister was going to convince me otherwise... even by bringing the power of a Justicar to bear. In reality, it had quite the opposite effect."

Shepard, recovering quickly with the combination of Liara's comforting touch and the Asari's boost of energy slipping through the link, looked at the matriarch directly in the eyes as she identified with the feeling. "You can rest assured that nothing they do to me... to us..." She glanced at Liara and reached out to squeeze the hand of her Iomáin Álainn as she continued, "... will change the way I feel about this union, Aethyta."

"Good." Aethyta grinned as she said, "Because I honestly like you, Shepard... but if you break my
Liara laughed softly, understanding the intent of her father's statement as the squeeze of Shepard's hand within her own brought so much more than just the assurance of the physical contact. The wave of dogged determination that came from the Spectre bolstered Liara's spirit as she smirked and replied, "Well, it's good that we don't need to worry about Samantha's commitment, then, isn't it? As for the republics, I would like to believe we have nothing to worry about from any of them. We definitely have steadfast approval from better than half of them. Obviously Armali and Majesa, as well as Serrice and Dassus... and, during the recovery, we sent our SILC team from the Estate to Anerzesa... Governess Cyrana has already expressed her support... And, while they haven't made any overtures, many others also benefitted from our support during those critical months."

Aethyta frowned. "How can you be so sure Serrice is among your allies? You blew the doors of the Temple of Athame wide open... along with all its secrets... particularly, the illegal hording of Prothean tech within its boundaries! It's very likely their minister will get sanctioned!"

Huffing, Liara responded, "Because their violation of the technology sharing accords was done outside the knowledge of the Serrice Governess, Matriarch Cyla. It was the decision of the military leadership... the Defense Ministers, including my mother... who hid the beacon because they wanted the technology gleaned from it. The Governesses, for the most part, are innocent of the crime and they, as members of the Governance Circle, are the ones who Shepard will face... not the Defense Ministers."

"Fair point." Aethyta nodded. "And, just perhaps, they may even use this to distance themselves from that crime. I hadn't thought of that and it could play to your favor. It would actually be a good way to separate themselves from the ministers... and any sanctions imposed upon them. I can very easily see them using your popularity and their support of the bonding to gain the good will of the populous and secure their position in the upcoming elections this next January."

"My only concern is this." Shepard hated what she was about to say and her expression was troubled as she continued, "Benezia obviously knew about the Beacon... It could put us in a very awkward position if Mozia...?" Shepard didn't finish, leaving the implied question in her words hanging in the silence.

"No." Aethyta responded promptly and firmly. "She did not. As soon as it came up, I asked her, point blank. She replied to the negative and I see no reason to think she would lie to me... or that she wouldn't have told you about it like Tevos did if she had held that knowledge. Like the rest of us, she knew how critically important that information was."

"Thank the Goddess." Liara breathed a sigh of relief. "I will still need to ask her myself, seeing as she is supposed to be representing me as the leader of House T'Soni. I do not look forward to posing the question."

"But Mozia will understand the need behind why you ask it, so don't trouble yourself over it, Liara." Aethyta smiled and stood up, stretching before turning her eyes to the Captain. "And we are done for the day, Shepard. After what I just relived and shared with you, I don't have it within me to renew a meld. I'll see you again on Monday?"

"Yes, you will." Shepard smiled tiredly and gave Liara a quick glance before turning back to the Matriarch. "We have an early morning run at the arena and will head to the townhouse afterward... probably be there before nine. We'll just go on up to our rooms, maybe get a soak and a shower before taking a little nap. Plan on the session being after lunch, if that's okay?"

"First full practice with the entire squad?" Aethyta's brow rose in question.
"Not quite yet." Shepard shrugged. "We're still missing Dazza and Tilghman. Everyone won't be physically in the same place until the end of July, giving us the three weeks before the bonding to really start honing our teamwork. That said, we can still get a pretty damned good idea before then. Dazza is a second to Salaeto on defensive systems, and we're using Cy Leuss as our interim sniper for Jatok's team."

"Huh," Aethyta grunted. "But I understand how much changing only one person on a small squad can make a huge difference. Until this Tilghman proves her worth, the squad will be hesitant... and hesitation can get people killed."

"Let's hope not; that's what the sessions at Armax are for." With that, Shepard stood and stepped up to clasp forearms with the matriarch. "We'll see you Monday, Aethyta."

Liara had risen as well and gave her father a quick hug. "See you again soon, Dad." She then placed a protective arm around the waist of her **siame** as she continued, "Tell everyone we say hello... and we'd like to stay for dinner on Monday night. We haven't had a chance to spend time with anyone at the townhouse and we need to... we'd like to."

Aethyta nodded and smiled. "I'll let Mozia and Aratiana know you'll be staying. Everyone will be happy to see you."

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**Armax Arsenal Arena, Armali, Thessia – 30 Jun 2188**

Monday morning came earlier than normal and Liara groaned as she rolled over to shut off the alarm in her omnitool, her body protesting against both the early hour and the lack of light outside the windows. Even so, she stood and stretched, moving immediately to the bathroom and then to the closet to get dressed in her armor skins, Shepard following in her wake. They each grabbed an eezo bar and drink on the way out the door and climbed into the shuttle, with both of the team pilots in the cockpit as they swiftly got underway.

The Armali Armax staff was ready and waiting upon their arrival, but was surprised by the appearance of Shepard and T'Soni, in person, along with the expected crew. The manager appeared in the locker room before they managed to get all their gear on, bowing to each of them in turn before stating, "I am Nevos Irani and it is my pleasure to meet you both in person. Had I known you were coming with the team today, we would have made arrangements for a more formal reception, Lady T'Soni."

Liara flinched and responded, "Please. Lady T'Soni was my mother. I prefer first 'Liara', then Dr T'Soni... but Lady Liara will suffice if you absolutely insist on the use of a proper title." She sighed softly and continued, "As for a reception, we don't really have the time today. We are here to complete squad drills... Perhaps a reception at some point in the future, following a nice round of demonstrations under our previously negotiated endorsement contract with your parent company, Armax Arsenal?"

"Absolutely!" The manager hesitated only briefly before responding, "And no hurt intended, Dr T'Soni... I can understand how the use of such a title would remain painful to you still; it will be my honor to comply with your request. As for a demonstration night... simply provide me with a date and I would be happy to make the arrangements!"

Shepard chuckled and nodded her head. "Excellent... As for now, we really need to get going, so we can finish up and be out of here before your doors open to the public. I have no desire to getmobbed before we have breakfast."
"Of course. I'll get out of your way." The manager immediately bowed and retreated, allowing the teams to move into the arena.

Shepard motioned to Livos and Jatok as she said, "Let's get this surprise party started. What are we doing?"

Livos grinned. "It is a specialized program we devised called Mercenary Challenge... seeing as mercs, pirates and slavers will most likely be the biggest problems in our post-war galaxy. For variety, the adversary is based on the standard composition of the big three mercenary groups... including mech support and biotics as appropriate."

Jatok chuckled as he added, "The settings are entirely random, so we have no idea what we're going to get until the match starts, though we only use the Elite and Super Elite levels... four rounds at each level, each hour. Each team gets two shots at each level and whoever has the most points at the end... wins. Loser cleans all the weapons and armor when we get home."

"That's pretty good motivation." Shepard grinned and glanced at Liara before asking, "So... how do we fit in?"

"You guys won't get a break... and you'll alternate teams. First round, Liara is with Team One, then Shepard with Team Two on the second..." Livos looked at Shepard. "Obviously, you go back-to-back... joining Team One on the third round, Liara will play with Team Two on round four."

Shepard nodded in understanding. "Then she goes back-to-back and plays round five with Team One..." She paused as a sudden realization hit her. "But then I get another back-to-back with rounds six and seven! That's two for me and only one for her!"

"That's because you're Shepard!" At that, Jatok laughed. "Shouldn't be a problem, right? Or are you afraid she's going to kick your ass?"

Before Shepard could respond, Liara exclaimed, "So you're making us compete against each other?" Liara looked at Livos as if she had just been stabbed in the back, making the Asari team leader laugh.

"Absolutely... and, seeing as you two haven't been practicing with us at full battle pace, I imagine you'll both be very tired by the time we get to the seventh and eighth rounds, which... by the way... will be at the Super Elite level."

Shepard's eyes narrowed as she passed her thoughts through the link. {Screw the competition, Liara. We'll fight like we always have when we've been separated on different squads... I'll give you what I can while I'm resting between matches, drinking energy boosts and eating eezo bars!}

{And I'll do the same, Samantha... and it will come out however it comes out.}

{And we have sessions with Aethyta and Sha'ira after, so neither of us will be cleaning armor or weapons... except our own when we get to the Townhouse.}

They grinned at one another; an act not lost on the Krogan team lead. "And there will be no cheating with your link that way. Plus, every two-round set adds a ten-percent score bonus modifier... again, random... so it's up to the team to figure out what it is and take advantage of it."

Jatok snarled, "And if one of you figures it out and lets it slip through the link, you're a traitor... because you're helping the other team get points."

By the seventh and eighth rounds, it was exactly as Livos had predicted, but Liara and Shepard refused to yield. Livos watched as Shepard sat down and consumed yet another drink and bar. A
smile flirted with the corners of her mouth as she sat down next to her captain, whispering in her ear, "Forget what Jatok said... Each of you has been helping the other on every round, haven't you?"

"Of course." Shepard smirked at her friend. "It's how we fight, Liv. We're a team... and if we go in someplace as separate groups, we're still fighting together as a unit, even when we split up between teams... So it makes sense to practice that way." She rolled her shoulders as she popped the last of the bar into her mouth and chewed, pausing the brief conversation until she swallowed. "And that's the way it's always going to be."

Livos laughed and clapped her on the back. "I never should have expected anything else, Captain." As the final round drew to a close, she looked up at the scoreboard and immediately realized two things. First, with the additions of Liara and Shepard, both teams' scores had improved significantly, and second, the long time familiarity between the commandos was still paying dividends. They had now come to Armax three times, and the commandos of Team One were still kicking Team Two's ass. Livos grinned; once again, the Krogan and the Alliance N7 would be on the cleaning crew.

T'Soni House Armali, Thessia , Athena Nebula

Shepard and Liara slipped quickly into the soothing waters of the spa in the commando quarters, seeing as Mozia and Aethyta occupied the master suite in the rebuilt townhouse. The House Steward, Aratiana Axeuss, stopped in and first handed the Captain a cup of Kaffe before passing Liara a cup of tea, stating, "We'll have a nice brunch ready for you when you get done here." She offered a respectful dip of her head before turning and disappearing back out the doorway.

Shepard was a bit red-faced and Liara slid over beside her, whispering quietly, "You have a beautiful body, Siame; you have no reason to be embarrassed or self-conscious around Aratiana. I, for one, am delighted to be seen with one such as yourself at my side." She ran the backs of her fingers across Shepard's cheek before placing a tender kiss on the same. Her voice light with humor, she grinned and added, "Your presence here does wonders for my self-esteem."

The Asari laughed softly as her comments made Shepard turn an even brighter shade of red. "Liara!" Shepard scrubbed the back of her neck with the hand not holding the mug. "This... openness... is all a bit strange to me. Had I thought about it, I would have tossed a swimsuit in my gear bag!"

"And deprive me of my normal wonderful view?" Liara would have sounded scandalized had it not been for the smirk on her face. "Why would you do such a thing to me?"

"Ha ha, Liara. Funny." Shepard slid as far down into the bubbles as she could without getting water in her Kaffe. "This is going to take some getting used to... if I ever do," she grumbled.

"I'm sorry, Sam." The smirk left and Liara heaved a sigh. "Let me distract you..." Liara rolled her eyes as Shepard's opened wide in shock, the thought coming through the meld making her exclaim, "With conversation, Samantha! Not sex! Goddess!"

Her face went yet another shade of red but, this time, Shepard actually did laugh at herself. "Gods, Liara. I'm sorry... but now I think I'm the one who should feel affronted..." At Liara's puzzled expression, she continued, "That you wouldn't want to have sex with me... from the tone of that exclamation."

"Goddess knows that isn't true!" It was Liara's turn to blush as she whispered quietly, "Just not in the public spa!"
"Well... I guess I should be happy that we agree on that point at least!" Shepard's embarrassment faded as she sipped on her Kaffe, finally relaxing with the steady surge of the warm jets massaging her tired muscles.

Liara also took a sip of her tea before setting her cup on the edge of the tub... closing her eyes as her thoughts shifted unexpectedly to the past. "You know, I used to hate it when Shiala made me exercise along with everyone else, especially swimming laps, which we all did in the nude. I was very shy while growing up... embarrassed by what I always considered a rather... ordinary... physique, compared to the athletic build of all the commandos."

She felt the surge of protest come through the link before the words ever crossed Shepard's lips and she smiled as the Captain sat up and set her mug on the edge of the spa as well, practically hissing her objection, "That is absolutely, positively, the most errant statement I have ever heard you make, T'Soni!"

Shepard paused, seeing the appreciative expression on the face of her Ionún Álainn. "And you know that, don't you?" It was a rhetorical question and Samantha didn't give Liara time to respond before placing her lips tight to Liara's in a slow, sensuous kiss, pausing only to draw breath before adding quietly, "You are beautiful, Liara... inside and out. And what you said earlier... about me doing wonders for your self-esteem? Let me tell you... that sentiment most definitely holds true in both directions. There is no one in the galaxy I would rather spend my life with, Blue. Tá tú mo gach rud." Her thoughts, as well as her words, were filled with an ardor that lit Liara on fire.

Liara's eyes had closed during the kiss and remained so until Shepard finished her proclamation. The emotions flowing through the link as the Spectre finished speaking made the Asari's heart race and she gasped, her eyes popping open to reveal a shrinking blue iris being swallowed swiftly by obsidian. Her voice was coarse as she reached out to pull the woman tight so she could whisper in her ear. "Goddess, Samantha... I love you too!"

The Asari's body quivered with need against that of the Spectre as she plunged deeper into the woman's mind, laid wide open by the Human's devoted expressions of love. Completely unprepared for such a swift and passionate response, Shepard moaned, "Liara!" as her body responded in ways over which she had absolutely no control. "Remember... where... Ah, fuck!" Her breathing became ragged as she stopped trying to regain control of her reactions, concern about their location no longer an issue as she gave into the joy of feeling her wanton lust rise to match that of her Promised.

Liara's primal need originated from deep within and, entangled with Shepard in a full meld, her physical cravings drew forth an equivalent hunger from her Human; when blue fingers slid between her legs to stroke through Samantha's soft folds, there was no stopping the sexual response to the Asari's prompts and it wasn't long before Shepard's entire body tensed and she felt a flood of warmth burst forth, her hips jerking in her ecstasy as she groaned in pleasure.

Not sure how or when it happened, though it had to have been when Liara pulled her close, Shepard realized she was straddling the Asari's lap and quickly wrapped an arm around her lover. The folds on Liara's lower back were flared open in the hot water of the spa and Shepard took full advantage of her position to return the attention so recently lavished upon her.

Liara growled with yearning as she arched into Samantha's touch and dropped her head to the woman's shoulder, exposing the folds on the side of her neck to the attentions of a warm tongue, which slid through with a tender caress before teeth latched onto one of the ridges with a gentle tug. A grunt of surprise escaped the Asari as a sharp spike of desire shot through her body; her hips bucked and she murmured, "Oh, Goddess!" as she felt her insides start to tumble, the emotional residual of Shepard's release inciting her own arousal.
Shepard released her hold on the ridge and raised her free hand to wrap around Liara's neck, drawing the Asari into another passionate kiss. As Liara's mouth locked onto pink lips, her hands rose to grip the sides of Shepard's head, so Sam dropped her hand from her lover's neck to slide it down, over the Asari's taut abs and into the warm folds below, turning her wrist and curling her fingers to push them upward, into Liara's heat. Liara cried out, the sound swallowed by their kiss as her siame's fingers came alive with biotics, driving her quickly to a peak and pushing her easily over the edge.

Now more drained than when they originally climbed into the spa, Shepard held her lover in her arms and started to chuckle, her face turning a light pink. As Liara raised a brow marking in tired curiosity, Shepard smiled, kissed her chastely on a cheek and whispered softly, "So much for being worried about someone seeing us naked in the spa. At this point, I'd be surprised if that's the only thing they saw, Grá mo chroit."

"Goddess! And here, of all places. What is it about you that makes me so easily forget myself?" Liara buried her face in Shepard's shoulder and started shaking with suppressed laughter, a nervous edge to her words as she said, "I can only hope word does not get to my father... We would never hear the end of it!"

After brunch and a nice long nap, Shepard got dressed and made her way to the commando offices, where Aethyta had set up shop. During their previous sessions, they had initially spoken about Asari relationships in general, particularly about the relatively shorter lifespans of their mates and their normal coping mechanisms for how they dealt with the loss of a loved one. And, even though Benezia was Asari, her life had been ended prematurely... so, Aethyta had spoken primarily from the point of view of her own life experiences. The Matriarch's life had definitely been colorful and her memories were extremely vivid... but those from the last session had been particularly painful. "That's the worst of it, Shepard. From here on out, we need to focus on the specifics regarding the necessary rituals that will have to be performed."

Aethyta turned her chair and opened the cabinet behind her desk, pulling out a bottle of Akantha and two liqueur glasses. She poured each full and turned back, placing them on the middle of her desk before pushing one of the glasses toward Shepard. "Drink this, you might need it," before picking up her own glass, tipping it toward the captain and downing it in a single gulp. "Ahhh. That's better." Twinkling in merriment, Aethyta's eyes watched Shepard, the matriarch sitting in silence until the woman downed her drink. Flashing a quick smile, she set her glass back on the desk and poured it full, holding the bottle up as an offering.

"That's damned good!" Shepard stared into the glass in surprise, having expected something much more potent... along the lines of Aethyta's love of Ryncol. "Why the Hell not?" Shepard shrugged and set the glass down so Aethyta could fill it with the smoky-sweet golden liquid a second time. She read the label as the matriarch poured. "Akantha... pretty tasty stuff."

"Not only tasty, but good for hangovers, too." Aethyta picked up her glass, this time taking only a sip as she leaned back in her chair. "Once you get past the matriarchal inquiry, the fun begins. There will be receptions and formal introductions that will drive you absolutely insane if you take them too seriously. My best advice for this is simple – remember it's all about your bonding with Liara. She's the leader of a high house who has no choice but to travel in those circles; she'll hate every minute of it, so don't make it harder for her by bitching and moaning about it."

They both sipped at their drinks, but Aethyta stared into the glass as she continued, "I hated it when Benezia played politics... She actually liked it, so my hatred of it caused friction between us. You need to understand the role Liara has to play during those times and support whatever it is she has to
do; you'll be leaps and bounds ahead of where I ended up with all my complaining and resentment."

"I certainly owe her that much," Shepard huffed. "I don't remember how many times I've dragged her around to parties and speeches neither one of us cared to attend, but we... I... didn't have a choice. Liara never once complained about coming with me, so you have no worries there – I will most definitely repay the favor."

"Easier said than done, but it's good that you at least start out with that conviction... so let's move on. Once all the political crap is done and just before the actual bonding ceremony, you and Liara will travel to the Temple By The Sea; it's a High House tradition that cannot be ignored. You'll be met by a priestess, who will escort you down into a cavern that has multiple openings at sea level. You and Liara will pick the downward path and your choices will determine which of the many seaside tidal pools you end up at... each of which has its own special significance. If you believe in that sort of thing, your choices supposedly reveal important qualities about your relationship and aid the Priestess in choosing which blessing you should receive."

She chuckled as she watched Shepard roll her eyes. "Hey, I'm with you, there. It's very Siari... You know, the whole All is One thing... That the universe is a consciousness and every life within it is an aspect of the greater whole, hence your choices lead you to exactly where you are supposed to end up."

"You've misinterpreted my... distaste... for disbelief," Shepard sighed. "I was hoping, apparently futilely, that I was done with Dwyn... the Celtic Trickster King of Mischief and Love... and that I could just simply live my life with Liara."

"You determine your own fate, Shepard." A quick frown flashed across the matriarch's face as she stated, "You and Liara will be just fine; you keep my girl happy and the rest will take care of itself." The tantalizing flavor of the Akantha tickled Aethyta's tongue as she relaxed and took another sip, pausing a moment to savor the smooth heat as it slipped down her throat.

"Goddess, that's good. Now... where was I? Ah, the tidal pools. Whichever pool you end up at is the one in which she'll complete the ritual cleansing." Aethyta's contemplative expression was inexplicably replaced by a smirk as she said, "From what I've heard, I'm sure you two will handle this next step just fine, but for the cleansing? I'm not speaking figuratively. You and Liara will both strip naked before climbing into the pool and will remain so until she gives you and Liara her final blessing."

"Wait. What?" Shepard stared wide-eyed at Aethyta, looking for even the slightest hint the matriarch was trying to deceive or tease her. "Naked? Until the final blessing?"

"Yes, Shepard. Naked. Nude. Bare-assed!" Aethyta rolled her eyes. "You Humans and your damned self-consciousness. How in Hell do you ever plan on having children, being so fucking priggish?"

"That's easy!" Shepard felt the heat climbing up her neck, looking anywhere but at Aethyta as she answered, "But it'll be alone... in our bedroom... in private!"

"You honestly expect me to believe you've never fucked my girl anywhere but in your own bedroom? By the blazes, Shepard! How incredibly naïve... and boring... is that?"

Shepard couldn't stop herself from thinking of a number of rather memorable places she would enjoy making love with Liara, but the expression on Aethyta's face told her the matriarch was specifically referencing their morning activities in the commando communal spa. Having her worst fear come to fruition, she let out a groan of dismay as Aethyta immediately erupted in laughter. "I've heard some
rather... stimulating... rumors from the commandos today."

The captain instantly turned a rather uncharacteristic shade of scarlet as she blurted out, "Gods, Aethyta! Promise me you won't tease Liara about that! She'll die of embarrassment!"

"Well I'll be damned! So they're true? There's hope for you two yet!" Aethyta was laughing so hard at the Captain's discomfort, she was actually crying. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she gasped, "Ah, fuck. I can't breathe!"

Her head in her hands, Shepard mumbled, "Please... all I'm asking is that you don't harass Liara."

Aethyta wheezed and wiped her face a second time before drawing a deep breath and blowing it out fast. "Of course I won't harass her – I'm damned proud of her!" After another fit of laughter she continued, "But that is a fine example as to why I'm not her mentor for this event!" As she tried to catch her breath, Aethyta continued to chuckle as she wiped yet more tears from her cheeks. "Goddess, Shepard. You and Liara are a perfect match... you absolutely kill me!"

Shaking her head, she finally managed to continue, "Anyway... Both of you will strip down and get into the pool..."

Her fleeting hope dashed, Shepard interrupted, "Then you're not kidding?"

Aethyta struggled, and failed, to keep a straight face as she replied, "No, I'm not, Shepard. You will undress and climb down into the tidal pool as instructed; then the priestess will lead you through the ritual, her words indicating what actions you are supposed to complete in which order. Just listen closely and follow Liara's lead."

Looking back at Shepard she grinned. "This is the part I know you misunderstood... because I could see the pure panic in your eyes." She let out a little chuckle and concluded, "When you're done and the cleansing ritual is complete... not the entire bonding ritual, you idiot... you will dress one another in a very plain white shift to return to the surface. The three of you will then return to the Estate, where the Priestess will escort you to separate rooms, bless everything you are to wear in the next day's bonding ceremony and leave you there to spend the night, alone, in quiet self-reflection." With a huge grin on her face, she added, "It's not a continuous chain of events and you do get to wear clothes for the final ceremony."

"Gods be damned, Aethyta! When you said until her final blessing, I thought you meant all the way to the end of the whole damned thing... when she blessed and activated the bonding bracelets!"

Aethyta couldn't help but start laughing all over again. "I know! And your reaction was completely predictable... and totally priceless!"
Catching up and Getting Caught

Chapter Notes

Anam Cara - Soul Friend/Mate

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

Ionúin Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Kata - detailed choreographed patterns of martial arts movements, practiced solo or in pairs

Leannán - Lover (Gaelic)

Ru'shan - "Child of my Blood" (Krogan)

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

XO - Executive Officer

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 30 Jun 2188

Liara was awaiting her arrival when Shepard returned to their guest suite. By the expression on the Asari's face, the Spectre immediately knew that her Anam Cara had overheard the discussion with Aethyta via the link and she smiled bashfully, wrapping her arms around her lover as Liara buried her face in Samantha's shoulder. The Asari's face was flushed and her entire body was shaking with suppressed laughter, making it impossible for Shepard to not laugh along with her as a jumble of emotions streamed through the link; embarrassment, a hint of fear, amusement and, most surprisingly, a sense of relief. "Li?"

Liara pulled her head away enough to speak clearly, the liberation she felt reverberating through Shepard's psyche as she responded to her siame's vague request. "Yes... relief, Samantha. Finally, just perhaps, my father will quit taunting me about my prudishness, my coyness... my timidity resulting in the lack of the normal, expected Asari maidenhood sexual activities."

"I very much doubt that, Liara." Shepard paused, suddenly remembering the tongue-lashing delivered by Mozia regarding what the matriarch considered disrespectful comments made by Aethyta toward the head of House T'Soni. "Then again, while I doubt she'll stop entirely, it certainly may temper her comments a bit."

Shepard relaxed in Liara's embrace as the Asari leaned contentedly into her shoulder, a feeling of calm bliss surrounding the couple as they simply stood, wrapped in each other's arms until curiosity finally forced the Captain to break the silence. "So... You know how things went with Aethyta... How was your session with Sha’ira?"

"Much like your initial sessions with my father, my first three centered around emotional control and honing my melding techniques... something I am sure would have been done by my mother once I came of age... had circumstances not dictated otherwise." Liara paused as a wave of melancholy
threatened to break her composure but she took a deep breath and took comfort from Samantha’s embrace, the strength of Shepard’s love helping to provide the motivation to, at least temporarily, overcome the tide of sorrow as she continued. "It leads me to believe Sha’ira and Aethyta are coordinating their lessons, as my session today was also concerned with the ceremonial rituals.” Liara's eyes went obsidian as she invited Shepard into a light meld in order to share her actual memories of the afternoon.

The consort had shown her both the entrance to the caverns and the ocean-side exits to the tidal pools. Sha’ira had spoken reverently as she explained, "I am forbidden to show you the interior pathways, the choices with which you will be faced, or the content of the various blessings, Liara, but I can show you one of the pools and the cleansing ritual itself that I, as a consort initiate, had to go through in order to purify my spirit, before I would be entrusted with the secrets of others."

Shepard watched in shy fascination as some unknown Asari helped Sha’ira disrobe; conflicting feelings of guilt – as if she was invading their privacy – and honest admiration at the beauty of their physiques swept over her as she watched the two descend into the pool together. Liara hugged her tightly for a moment as she 'spoke' through the link. {Do not concern yourself, Siame. I know how you feel about me... and I agree with your opinion of them both; there is no doubt both consorts possess enviable physical beauty.}

{They don't hold a candle to you, Liara.} A tight squeeze was her only reply as the thought left the Asari speechless from the love infused emotion of contentment flooding through her mind.

Once the sharing of Liara's memory was compete, they withdrew from the meld; both Liara's and Shepard's hearts were breaking, with Samantha having shown Liara bits of her own session with Aethyta. The last thing Liara had expected to see at that moment was her father's memories of her mother, making Benezia's loss that much more acute as they prepared for their own bonding. Attempting to swallow the tears that threatened to overwhelm the fragile hold she had on her self-control, Liara drew a ragged breath. "Goddess, I do miss her, Samantha… I miss the chance that was stolen from us to complete our reconciliation, and I absolutely hate that she cannot be here to witness and delight in the bonding of her only daughter to someone such as yourself; one whom even she... with all her high standards and expectations... would have been overjoyed to see me make a lifetime commitment to."

Throat tight with grief, her last few words barely emerged as a quiet squeak and tears now flowed freely down the Asari's face... with the true meaning of the loss of her mother finally hitting home. In an attempt to comfort her Ionún Álainn, Shepard pulled back just enough to run her thumbs gently across lightly freckled blue cheeks, tenderly wiping away the tears and placing a loving kiss on quivering lips. The kiss was broken as a sob wracked Liara and she buried her face once again in Shepard's shoulder.

She withdrew her arms from around the woman's waist and tucked them against her chest, allowing Samantha's strong arms to completely encircle her as the Spectre guided them slowly across the room. Her destination was a chaise lounge next to the French doors leading to their private balcony – where Shepard sat, leaned back and stretched out. She brought Liara down beside her, the Asari never leaving the consoling wrap of her embrace as they nestled deep into the chair. Her body shook as the full weight of Liara’s grief poured forth for the first time since her mother had departed the world of the living... since Spectre Shepard had released her tortured soul from its entrapment by the Reaper Sovereign.

{She'll not see our bonding. Never see how happy you make me. Never see her grandchildren born... or witness their growth into the wonderful Asari I know they will become… or how good a father you will be to them...} The thoughts cascaded, along with many others, relentlessly fast and
furious through the link and Shepard simply opened herself to let them wash over and through her mind as Liara cried herself out, the gasping sobs continuing until her throat was raw and her body wrung out. The vulnerable maiden finally fell into an exhausted sleep, safely cocooned in the loving arms of her steadfast protector.

Shepard had held the Asari tight, warm lips pressed against the sides of her crests, hot with the exertion of such wracking sobs until Liara finally dozed off. Her own salty tears trickled down her face, the painful emotions of her distraught lover having wreaked havoc on her own psyche. She loosened her hold on the now relaxed Asari and gently eased her head against the back of the chaise as she thought about everything that had ripped through her mind in the relatively short period of time.

Never once had there been any hint of accusation or blame accompanying her Iónúin Álainn's memories... only sorrow and pain at what would be missed in the future. Shepard sighed and closed her eyes, the warmth of Liara's body against hers a soothing balm to her ravaged soul, finally... and honestly... knowing that her lover held no malice – even in the deepest, darkest recesses of her mind – for Samantha's role in Matriarch Benezia's death. That assurance allowed her to slip quickly into restful slumber, Liara tucked securely in her arms.

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A hand on her shoulder gently woke her from her sleep; Shepard's eyes opened slowly and she blinked a couple of times before the concerned face of Riana Iregos slowly came into focus. She queried in a whisper, "Riana. Something wrong?"

"You tell me, Nara." Her gaze shifted to the tear-streaked face of her sleeping mistress and back to the reddened eyes of the Captain. "You both look as if you have received horrible news. What has happened?"

Relieved, a small smile graced the Human's lips as she answered quietly, "Nothing, Ri... Well, that's not entirely true." Her focus drifted to the sleeping Asari stretched out at her side and draped across her chest, her deep rhythmic breathing proof that Liara remained sound asleep. She ran a hand softly down her lover's back. "Nothing new happened; we simply reached a point in our bonding preparations which suddenly made Liara acutely aware of her mother's absence."

Sinking slowly into the chair at the right angle to the chaise, Riana responded with only one word. "Oh."

"Yeah. Oh." Shepard drew a deep breath and released it slowly, sighing softly as she continued to rub Liara's back. "It kind of hit her all at once... and all those suppressed emotions poured out in a torrent... and through the link." Her expression became shielded as memories of finding her father on the metal deck of the SSV Geneva's engineering room crept in. "The premature loss of a parent is not something I would ever care to relive if I had any choice in the matter, but it's part of life... and, having lost my father when I was very young, I can easily understand... and empathize... with Liara's pain."

After a long, thoughtful pause filled with silence, Riana replied, "In a way that I cannot; my... estrangement... from my parents makes it difficult. The death of Ryati likely gives me some idea of how it must feel but, as I think about that time, I am sure it is not the same as losing a... caring... parent."

"Our link also helps... or hurts, depending on the perspective... because I can feel and see it as she does. Experiencing it through her eyes as if it was my own memories... My heart cannot help but break for her. The death of a parent – you lose a part of yourself. A part of your history and a part
of what made you who you are."

"In that case, I think I am happy to not have that special link with anyone." Riana looked at the stress in the sleeping Asari's face. "How do you maintain separation? I would think distance in this case would aid you in being better able to support her through this time."

A sad smile spread across the Spectre's face. "It's no longer a matter of supporting her from the outside, but of sharing the burden from within. A combined strength to survive life's trials..." Her level of happiness increased as she continued, "...and shared enjoyment over our successes. It's not so bad, Riana, having someone with which to share even the most intimate of life's details. Matter of fact, it is frequently good... very, very good."

"That is good to know, Shepard." Riana replied with a wan smile as she glanced at her omnitool. "I actually came to tell you dinner was about ready... since neither of you answered your comms. However, I think now that perhaps I should bring it here to your rooms."

"Give me a few minutes and I'll let you know. We came here with the intent of staying for dinner with the commandos and getting some visit time in." Shepard shifted slightly. "Let Aratiana know what happened and let me talk to Liara. I'm pretty sure we'll be down after a quick shower."

Riana stood and bowed slightly. "As you wish, Nara. I will await your call." She turned and quickly exited the room as her Captain began placing gentle kisses on the sides of Liara's crest.

As Liara began to stir, Shepard smiled and whispered, "Hey, you. Welcome back to the conscious world. Seems we've taken a rather long nap... and it's dinner time."

A voice rough from both crying and sleep queried, "Did you sleep as well?"

"I did. Riana just woke me." Shepard helped Liara sit up as she finished, "I told her to give us a few minutes and I'd let her know if we were going to join them or if we wished to have something brought up."

Liara blinked and stretched, standing slowly from the chaise and offering a hand so that Shepard would follow. "I would love to eat in... but we came here to visit and they are expecting us. They are my friends and I do not care to disappoint them." She looked into the face of her lover and noticed Shepard's bloodshot eyes. "I am sorry, Siame. I did not mean to..."

She was silenced by an affectionate kiss. "Shush, Blue. We share our souls, for good and bad. That is something I have come to accept and the death of your mother is not something you should suffer alone... not as long as I'm here."

Liara's heart was warmed by the adoring sensations full of encouragement that suddenly traveled through the link and she smiled, surprising her Promised. "That is most certainly not the only reason... not even the most important. You are here because you love me and I love you... and we are very close to being bonded. Our lives and those of our children will carry my mother's legacy forward; it is the best we can do... and I plan on that best being very good, indeed."

Having made their way downstairs, they were welcomed by a buffet-style dinner as was popular among the household. With so many different people and so many individual tastes, it was the most efficient method to ensure the commandos had choices among which they could find their fill. Shepard and Liara ended up at a table with the two matriarchs, along with the Armali Guard Captain, Nayla Axoni, and her two team leads, Teana Seloni and Aressa T'Saptos, as well as Aratiana and
their new house doctor, Corrina Sidhu.

Liara nodded in recognition to the doctor whom she had recruited and sent to the Estate during the reconstruction. "Doctor Sidhu. It is very good to finally meet you in person; I've heard very good things."

"Then we are even," the doctor responded rather cheekily. "Please, Lady Liara. I have heard you prefer things to be much less formal than what is customary and Aethyta has already set precedent. I would be happy to address you simply as Liara... but only if you will call me Corrie in return."

Liara laughed, her eyes dancing to match the smile on her face. "That would be wonderful, Corrie. It is very nice to meet someone not quite so caught up in tradition and ceremony."

As those around the table enjoyed the banter, Nayla turned to her captain. "So, Nara. How is the new team shaping up?"

"Hailot Jatok has turned out to be a lot of fun to work with", Shepard said. "I was surprised by his abundant sense of humor... all while being deadly serious about his job and his reputation."

"You know... I felt the same." Liara's face held a bit of a sad smile. "In a way, he reminds me of Wrex... but he doesn't stand a chance of ever taking over that special place I keep in my heart for my favorite Krogan Battlemaster."

"No one will ever replace Wrex... for either of us." Shepard smiled wistfully. "He helped us through a lot of shit, that's for sure." She suddenly laughed. "It's really weird to think of him as a father to that little tiny ball of life... their little Ru'shan."

"Agreed." Liara paused thoughtfully. "On both points... Our friend Wrex and Jatok, whom will make a good team leader, and the Alliance N7, Harley Creath, is going to make an excellent second. It will be interesting to meet the sniper when she gets here... I don't believe I've ever encountered a human, and a female at that, proficient in the use of a Kishock sniper rifle." Liara continued to think about the developing team before adding, "The rest of the ground team members seem to be getting along rather well."

"That is good." Nayla nodded in approval as her eyes wandered back and forth between the couple. "You are well aware that knowing and liking every member on your team creates bonds that make each more willing to fight for the other. Nurturing those relationships is an excellent way to start forming your new team." She paused and focused on Shepard as she asked, "I am curious – are you going to integrate the two teams... or keep Livos' team as a coherent unit?"

Shepard raised her eyebrows at the question and then shrugged. "I really don't know yet. We'll keep them as they are for now. We have myself and Liara, as well as the Batarian Adept, Bek Korragan, to help the second team with biotics if necessary... but we will be swapping them around in some of the Armax sessions; just to make sure they can intermix and understand how each of their particular talents can contribute as a part of the whole." She laughed as she asked, "Asari do the same... do you not call them 'mixed unit tactics'?"

"Ahh. Well done, Nara. You have beaten me to my own point."

As each finished their dinners, people began to stop by the main table, with Shepard and Liara promising each one they would be spending the evening in the common area and planned on staying to chat with them. "We will answer any questions you may have and are happy to discuss anything you desire... or nothing at all if you want the evening to be a purely social event." Liara smiled softly and took a deep breath. "I have missed you all... missed being here, on Thessia, and would love the
Shepard caught the thought through the link and turned to Aratiana. "We have two more sessions this week, as well as an exhibition at Armax on Friday night. If it's not an inconvenience, we would like to come here again on Wednesday for our sessions and stay through Saturday? Schedules permitting, perhaps we'll even get a chance to head down to the Farmer's Market on Saturday morning before we head home."

As smiles erupted all around and quiet titters of laughter and approval echoed through the commandos of House Armali, Mozia answered for the steward. "You are always welcome and, as the Lady and Captain of House T'Soni, your presence is never an inconvenience, Shepard."

Aethyta growled, "Oh, sure. Did you think about the fact that maybe I like going out to the Estate... to get out of the city for a bit?" The smirk playing at the edge of her lips gave her away and Shepard chuckled.

"Nice try, Aethyta... but you know the reverse is true and that you are always welcome there as well." Her voice rose and her gaze traveled across the room as she stated, "In case there is any question, I want you all to know that we consider each and every one of you as family. As such, you are all welcome at the Estate, any time, any day... no invitation required, as our doors are always open to you."

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T'Soni Country Estate, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 1 Jul 2188

Samantha Traynor managed to open the door to the room she shared with Riana, despite having both her arms together in front of her, hands with fingers spread, holding a pile of freshly laundered and folded clothes. Once in their room, she set her burden on the bed so she could sort and place everything onto the shelves in the cabinet she'd chosen as her armoire.

She had nearly completed her task when a shadow fell across the still open doorway. "By the Goddess, Sammi. I am gone for barely a day and it would appear you have finally accepted your move to Thessia, even if it's only been two weeks since you submitted your resignation request to the Systems Alliance Personnel department." With a smirk on her face, she added, "You have taken over yet another cabinet? I suppose it's too late for me to ask if this is truly your heart's desire."

Taking the few steps needed to close the distance between them, Traynor replied with a smirk of her own. "In fact, it is too late. I'm merely taking my terminal leave before my resignation becomes final, but the request has already been processed. I have just under sixty galactic standard days to do... well... whatever I want to do... and that includes making space for myself in our room."

Seeing a slight change in Riana's happy expression prompted Sammi to quickly add, "And you need to realize my heart's desire is standing right in front of me, Riana Iregos." She punctuated her affirmation by reaching under the Asari's arms to place her hands on a pair of muscular shoulders as she leaned in to softly brush her lips across Riana's. "I've never been happier, my love. Sharing your quarters and your bed on the Normandy was wonderful... like having every dream I ever had about you come true. Now, being able to spend time with you... here... on your home world, in addition to the time we'll spend together on the Knight Shade? I really feel as if I gambled everything on a Kepesh-Yakshi game and won the grand prize!"

Riana smiled sadly and sighed, "I am sorry to say I am only home for the day. Tomorrow we head back to Armali again... and will stay there through Saturday." She paused and crinkled her forehead in thought. "Though I am unsure if that means we will be back Saturday evening or Sunday morning." Her forehead smoothed out as she suggested, "Perhaps you could come with us? Spend
some time in the city?"

"I do have a job, you know." Traynor smiled. "Liara has me pulling all the Broker equipment out of storage and making sure all the components are in good working order. She then wants me to connect it to the network and update all the software... in preparation for installation in the Townhouse. That way, if she goes there, she doesn't have to rely on relays from the Knight Shade; she'll have an active terminal at both locations."

Traynor fell silent for a moment. Her expression turned serious as she said, "Riana, with the war done and the miserable Victory Tour completed, it's easy to see the utter bliss displayed by your Mistress and Captain Shepard whenever they're together... and it has me thinking." Sammi slid her hands slowly down the Asari's back; after pausing on her hips, she pushed Riana away slightly before releasing her hips in order to grasp both her hands. Taking backwards steps, she drew her siame along until she could sit on the edge of the bed; looking up at her beautiful blue face, she solemnly said, "Riana, your love for me is the reason I have been drawn to your home world; that, and the fact that I love you so much I sometimes think I'm gonna simply burst with joy. What I have with you is something I want to hold onto forever. So, I was wondering..." At this point, Traynor paused and looked down at their hands, light brown gently holding hands of blue.

After a few moments, Riana prompted, "What are you wondering, Sammi? Please tell me, my Bred."

The woman looked back up at Riana and shyly answered, "You're going to think me right barmy to be asking this, but I would really like to know. Do you think..." Traynor paused again, heat rising to her face with both shyness and a tinge of anxiety as she continued, "Is it possible you would ever be interested... in bonding with a Human... with me, like Shepard and Dr T'Soni are planning?"

Riana's eyes widened slightly as she processed the question for several moments. When she replied, it was in a thoughtful tone of voice. "Sammi... are you asking me to be your bondmate? I am truly honored that you would consider a permanent union with an Asari... with me, but do you know what that entails?" Riana turned to sit beside Sammi; bringing an arm around behind her back, she placed a hand above her hipbone and hugged her. "Truthfully, there's been so much going on, I really cannot give you an answer, as I have not had enough alone time to give the matter any thought." Seeing disappointment in the soft, honey-brown eyes regarding her, she added, "I am only 173 years old, Sammi; that's still young by Asari standards. Having said that, I think being bonded with you would bring me immense joy, even if it would probably be at least another hundred years before I could conceive children."

Sammi nodded as Riana finished speaking. "I just had my 30th birthday, Riana. Should I be fortunate enough to see my 150th, you would still be only 293 years old." In a voice suddenly filled with sad longing, she concluded, "I would love nothing better than for us to conceive a child together, but I think that would really be pushing nature... for both of us."

Seeking to provide comfort to the one she loved, Riana wrapped her Human up with both arms and pulled her close, placing a kiss on a soft cheek. "Sammi, you are a wonderful person, and I think you are making yourself sad for no good reason. There will be time enough for us to make our union permanent, and if a single child is the result of that union, then we will have accomplished something wonderful... I would love for us to conceive a child together. But she would be many years in our shared future... and, in the meantime, we must finish preparing the Knight Shade for its first official flight as a Spectre vessel."

Standing, she waited until a pair of hands grasped the one she offered; pulling slightly, she was a bit surprised at the full-body hug she received. Sammi whispered, "We can discuss this in more detail
tonight, my love," before letting go and leading her out of their room.

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T'Soni House Armali, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 2 Jul 2188

Spending Tuesday back at the Estate almost seemed to be a waste of travel time. Lyessa had things well in hand and Shepard had spoken only briefly with Livos and Jatok about continuing their combat and quick response drills exactly as they had been doing. They had parted with a quick 'see you on Friday' exchange and Shepard and Liara had gone to their rooms to enjoy their private spa tub before repacking their bags for their follow-on four-day trip to Armali. Immediately after breakfast the next morning, Livos and her team herded everyone aboard the Aletheia and got them underway. Once safely delivered to the townhouse, Livos turned the protection detail over to Nayla, bid her farewells, and returned to the Estate to continue honing the Spectre ground teams into a finely tuned weapon.

Regarding the prolonged stay in Armali, Sha'ira was more excited than Shepard and Liara were, as she relished the opportunity to spend nearly a whole day shopping at some of the city's finer clothing and accessory establishments. As soon as they arrived Wednesday morning, she requested an escort with transportation into the city for the next day. "I am hoping to find something nice for Raesia... and the stores currently on the CGC still have much to be desired. In some ways, even knowing now that the entire structure was designed as a trap by the Reapers, I still miss the familiarity of the Citadel."

Liara smiled warmly at her friend and confidant. "I'm sure a shopping trip can be arranged. I'll talk to Nayla and see who she has available. Though, I may suggest we pull Cyenia Axeuss and Team 1 from the Estate. With both Spectre teams there, in addition to the regular commandos, they can certainly spare a team and it would give Cy an opportunity to visit with her mother once you get back from your shopping excursion."

Sha'ira's eyes lit with happiness. "I think that would be lovely, Liara! How thoughtful... and it makes me feel like I am less of an imposition on your commando team that way. I still think I should have brought at least a few acolytes."

Shepard laughed. "Don't worry about it, Sha'ira. They'll probably welcome the change of routine... Besides, the commandos who get to go shopping with you aren't exactly enduring a hardship. Don't be surprised if you're busy giving them fashion advice the entire day. They've seen some of the dresses you've procured for Liara, so they know damned well you've got excellent taste."

"Oh, Captain. You flatter me." Sha'ira's laughter was musical as she continued, "And since when did you become such a sweet-talker? Liara is good for you, my dear!" As Shepard turned a light shade of pink, the consort ran a finger teasingly outward across the Spectre's jaw until it slipped off her chin. Her eyes twinkling in merriment, she said, "There's the reserved, bashful commander I met way back when."

With a quick wink, Sha'ira turned back to Liara and was all business. "However... All of that is for tomorrow. Right now, we need to focus on you, dear, and take a second look at the bonding ritual requirements. Shall we get started?"

"Certainly." Liara hesitated as a quick prod arrived through the link. "And I think I also need to speak with you about some troubling memories that have emerged through this process." Her voice dropped in volume and she stared at the floor as she continued, "Regarding my mother."

Sha'ira looped her arm gently through Liara's and spoke comfortably. "Of course, Liara. Missing
your mother at this stage of your life is the most natural of emotions... and I am most certainly willing to help you deal with the sense of loss that must bring." She gave an understanding glance at the captain. "I am also aware of the Human tradition for women to have their fathers 'give' them away at their wedding. Even though I am not your mentor, I will always remain available to you as a counselor, Shepard, should you ever need my services."

A calm acceptance flowed through Samantha as she answered politely, "Thank you, Sha'ira, but my father's loss is nothing new to me, so I've had many years to come to terms with his absence. I appreciate the offer, though, and will definitely keep it in mind."

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T'Soni House Armali, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 4 Jul 2188

On their mid-week break, Shepard and Liara simply relaxed by the pool of the reconstructed townhouse... which, as it turned out, was a great misnomer. Rather than rebuilding the simple, modern abode, the new Armali headquarters for House T'Soni was more of a compound than a building; the large city lot, just under two acres in size, was now surrounded in its entirety by a rather formidable security fence. The new house, which sat in the left rear corner of the parcel, was constructed around the periphery of a 1600 square meter area and provided for a rather large, protected central courtyard.

The first time they arrived after the war, Liara had been rather shocked; the modern townhome had been replaced by a structure much more militant in appearance. There was a large parking apron to the right, which held the VIP-1 and the Aletheia with little room to spare. Seeing as the Knight Shade was at least half again as large, it became immediately apparent the Spectre vessel would never be landing at Armali unless they used the Republican Guard docks at the city center. The smaller parking ramp directly in front of the house easily had enough room for the two house shuttles and three aircars... and there was a bit of additional space along the edge of the main apron for as many as eight or ten more, provided the drivers didn't mind tight parking.

As for the house, the entry door faced the parking ramp and was to the right of center on the south wall. Immediately upon entry, guests found themselves in a large casual area and reception room with a bar on the far end; a number of tables and comfortable couches providing seating throughout. Several large windows along the northern interior wall allowed for a beautiful view of the central courtyard's eastern side, which held a very nice patio with yet more tables, along with the pool beside which Shepard and Liara were currently reclined; beyond that was a single story building that housed the kitchen and dining areas. To the left of the reception hall was a modest hedge garden and a covered sitting area, designed for meditation and non-combat training, while the northwest corner contained a two-level dormitory with an upper covered watch-platform. Additionally, the entire structure had an eezo powered dome that could be raised in the event of poor weather or a hostile attack, but summer on Thessia was beautiful and the dome was not currently in use.

Liara sat quietly, holding Samantha's hand while she watched a couple of the commandos practicing katas and simply enjoyed the sunshine. "It feels strange to have nothing to do."

The first response she received was a low snort, followed by a laughing response. "It's not that we have nothing to do, Li; it's that we simply don't desire to do any of what's on our list today... and we actually have the luxury of ignoring it all for a change." Shepard grinned and squeezed the hand of her Leannán. "Besides, who says this is doing nothing? We've worked out, gone swimming, had brunch... and I was very much on the verge of taking a nap. Sounds pretty busy to me."

"You are correct, of course..." Liara paused and bit her lip before continuing hesitantly, "And there is something I need to finish before we head back to the Estate. Aratiana wanted to go over the guest
list and our available accommodations here in the city. She is thinking of temporarily redoing the commando rooms as guest quarters and putting the commandos aboard the ships. The *Aletheia* has ten berths and they can easily set up field cots in the hold for the rest... so it would work, but we need to meet with Matriarch Mozia on who would be staying at which location."

"We have so many coming to the bonding..." Shepard's eyebrows rose as she considered just how many people could stay at the estate, "...that we have to worry about where to put them all?"

Samantha's expression bordered between shock and dread and Liara's hand came up to cover her own smirk, apparently uselessly, as Shepard saw it anyway and quickly asked, "Just how many people are coming to this ceremony?"

"I don't know." Liara chuckled as the green eyes rolled towards the ceiling in disbelief. "That's why I need to stay here tomorrow... but I still need you to go to the market." She keyed her omnitool and waited for Shepard's to light in response. "That's a list of fresh fruits and vegetables Lyessa wants us to purchase for the Estate. She sent it to me last night after we told her of our plans to go shopping."

Shepard pulled up her omnitool and activated it, shaking her head when she saw the length of the list now in her possession. She looked up and smirked at Liara to ensure her next words wouldn't be misinterpreted. "Great. Savior of the galaxy turned errand girl. I'm on it, T'Soni."

Lake Bisel, Armali Republic, Thessia – 5 Jul 2188

Cy Axeuss had brought Team 1 with her to escort Sha'ira on her Wednesday shopping trip, and they had all decided to stay, first to give Cy more time to visit with her mother, but also to watch the Friday night Armax exhibition and then provide the transportation home for Liara and Shepard on Saturday afternoon, once the shopping was completed and the sleeping arrangements for their future guests were all sorted out.

As such, Shepard was strolling slowly through the Lake Bisel Farmers' Market along with commandos Fala Veya and Molia Tressi, members of First Team, currently with nothing better to do. Technically, the two were accompanying the Spectre as bodyguards for their Lady's Promised; in reality, they were extra hands to carry all the foodstuffs Lyessa, the House Steward at the Estate, had requested. Liara had remained behind at the townhouse to discuss room arrangements for the large number of guests they would have coming in; it was difficult for Shepard to fathom the bonding was less than six weeks away.

They were deep in conversation regarding the relative advantages and disadvantages of various assault rifles versus Shepard's preferred Locust submachine gun. She laughed at their latest argument. "Seriously? You're concerned about the weight? It doesn't honestly matter. Think of it this way – compared to my damned Graal, the Locust hardly weighs anything! I'm simply saying that the individual traits don't matter as much as you think. It's the combination of firepower, accuracy and range from everything you carry. They have to be complimentary or you're carrying the wrong weapons package as a whole."

Molia rolled her eyes in disbelief. "Really, Shepard? Weight is *everything* when you're out in the field... especially if one doesn't have augmented physical strength like you do!"

Before her Asari companion could continue, the Spectre's face clouded as she held up her hand to indicate silence. Training instantly took over and the commandos, who had come to trust the Human's instincts without hesitation, immediately stopped and took up defensive postures. Molia's playfulness had vanished and she asked quietly, "What is it, *Nara?*"
"Heavy engines... thrusters... something we shouldn't be hearing inside the outer boundaries of the city; especially here in the Farmers' Market." She had barely completed her sentence when a trio of ships roared overhead; the tortured wail of reverse thrusters at full-throttle assaulted their ears as the three unknown vessels abruptly descended to land in the middle of the town square.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Shepard's mind raced, jumping a dozen years back in time to the world of Elysium. "Slavers!"

{Liara! Slavers are attacking Lake Bisel! Get help here fast!}

The Spectre's urgent shout through the link was met first by shock, then a calm response. {Sending an emergency notification to the Armali Guard... and recalling everyone to the Knight Shade. I will rendezvous with them here, Shepard, and we'll be on our way.} There was only the briefest of pauses before she continued. {Stay safe. We'll be there soon.}

As a number of side streets and alleys blocked the line of sight between them and the center of the little town, they were unable to see what was happening there... but that didn't keep them from hearing the screams of disbelief and panic. Shepard turned and began to sprint down the nearest clear path as she shouted, "Come on! We may be the only ones here able to help them!"

The commandos reacted quickly and followed immediately behind only to be surprised when Shepard suddenly tried to stop short, running headlong into her back in the narrow alley and inadvertently pushing her forward. She had only started to shout, "Grenades!" when a six-pack of stun grenades exploded almost directly under their feet; she barely had enough time to think 'Fuck!' as stars began dancing before her eyes.

Before her vision cleared, a thoroughly surprised Spectre felt a biotic lash wrap around her neck, its charged surface burning her unarmored flesh and sending a harsh jolt of numbing power through her limbs, driving her to her knees just before she was unceremoniously yanked forward and struck hard on the back of the head with the butt of an assault rifle.

As she fell forward to land face first in the dirt alley – her limbs completely unresponsive even to her iron will – she sent out a final mental shout of warning to the XO of the Knight Shade. {Trap!}
Armali Republic, Thessia, At Large – 5 Jul 2188

"By the Goddess!" With the loud exclamation, Liara bolted up from her desk, tipping her chair over with a loud clatter. Dumbfounded, she leaned against the polished wood of her desk, her hands flat on its surface for support as the link seemed to waver slightly. "Shepard!"

Having heard Liara's urgent shout, Lyessa ran into the room, her voice ringing with worry as she queried, "Mistress! What in the galaxy?"

Her face taut with dread, the maiden whispered, "Just a moment," as she closed her eyes and focused all her mental energy on her Promised, concentrating and pushing love and support to Samantha through the link.

'Boosted' by Liara, Shepard regained consciousness relatively quickly – but not quick enough. She had a splitting headache and her neck burned; she couldn't help but think about her initial experience with Cerberus Dragoons and their weapon of choice – the biotic lash – when the Alliance had launched the assault on Cronos Station near the end of the war. She considered herself fortunate that the whip hadn't remained on her neck for more than an instant... as her breathing seemed normal and unrestricted, in sharp contrast to what it had been like after that first encounter. She groaned in both pain and frustration, her attempts to move thwarted by newly acquired accessories; she now wore slave cuffs, along with a collar which chaffed painfully on the raw skin it encircled.

The cuffs were held apart by a heavy rod roughly 50 centimeters long; additionally, her feet were held close together by a set of hobbles on her ankles, the chain between them roughly the same length. Worse, there was a thick black bag over her head totally preventing her from seeing
anything; her furtive attempt at raising her hands above her chest to remove this new addition was thwarted by what sounded like chains connecting the ankle hobbles to the rod between her wrists. She started to roll over, hoping she could shake off her new head covering to get a look at her surroundings, but her attempt was abruptly halted by the guttural growl of a Batarian and the violent jab of an electrified slaver rod.

As her head slammed back from the strong jolt, she instantly realized her situation had changed drastically... and was much worse than she'd originally assumed. Her ears ringing from the impact with the unyielding metal deck beneath her – rather than the bare ground of the Lake Bisel alley – meant she had very likely already been loaded aboard a ship. She flared her biotics for an attempt to break her bindings, only to be painfully shocked again... except this time it hadn't been done by the Batarian. It was immediately – and rather painfully – obvious to her that the collar on her neck and the cuffs on her wrists were the biotic suppression versions, and rather advanced compared to what she had seen utilized in the past. Praying the ship hadn't yet jumped the Parnitha Relay, she queried the link. {Liara?}

[Thank the Goddess! Shepard! Are you alright?]  

[Not exactly, Li. I think I'm in quite the fix, here.] She then went on to explain what little she knew about her situation, which wasn't much beside her certainty that she was now inside a Batarian slave ship that apparently had not left the system... seeing as they could still communicate through the link.  

[The good news is that you haven't even left Thessia. The response drills you have been running paid off. We were in the air in less than five minutes and immediately picked up the trail of a ship leaving the city at a rather high rate of speed. We took a chance and followed... With your confirmation of being on board a ship, I believe we surmised correctly.]

Beneath her hood, Shepard smiled in relief, knowing the Knight Shade and her newly selected crew was already underway for her rescue. She also recognized the irony in the fact that their own captain was the objective of their first rescue mission. {That's my girl. Any idea where we're headed?}

A quick little smile flickered across Liara's face as she caught the humor within Shepard's observation, but it faded quickly as she refocused on the specific situation confronting them. {We've got a pretty good idea... but only the general location. The ship has gone off-shore, meaning only one thing... Two things, actually, but I absolutely refuse to consider the second possibility.} Liara paused to draw a deep breath and Shepard sensed her concern.

The Spectre inhaled sharply as the nightmare inducing thought arrived, unbidden and unintentional, through the link. {They wouldn't... Would they? All this trouble just to drop me into the damned ocean? With all this metal attached to me?}

[Samantha! Stop! That's exactly the line of thought I did not want to discuss!]

The rest of Liara's protest was cut off as, in reaction to Shepard's sudden intake of breath, the Batarian who was apparently guarding her sneered and jabbed her again, enthusiastically shocking her repeatedly with rapid, multiple pokes that forced all the air from her lungs along with a deep cry of pain and frustration. He simply snickered with satisfaction and said, "Don't even think about it, Shepard! You're one Hell of a prize and I'm not going to let you escape on my watch... I'll fucking kill you first. I'm sure the ransom will be paid whether you arrive alive..." at this point he chuckled in a sinister manner, "... or dead!"

A doorway slid open and another voice, this one definitely Asari, rang sharply in the small compartment. "Stop it, you imbecile! She's not worth a single credit if she's dead! Your sponsor could give a Pyjak's ass about all the others taken as slaves... but she definitely wants Shepard alive."
The Batarian grumbled petulantly. "If she doesn't care about the others, how come you took away the other two who were with her... instead of leaving them here for me to have fun with?"

"Even with four eyes in your ugly face, it seems you cannot see how truly stupid you really are." The Asari snorted in disgust. "It certainly can't hurt to keep them as leverage so the great Captain Shepard won't misbehave. Those two are obviously members of her crew, so shut the fuck up and quit shocking the shit out of her. She has to be conscious when we arrive or the Boss will have your head... I'm certainly not going to hand her mine to save a Goddess-be-damned Batarian... and you're even more stupid than I thought if you think I would." The door opened again and the Asari said, "Just do what you're told if you expect to be paid."

As soon as the door slid closed following the Asari's departure, the Batarian stepped up and kicked Shepard hard in the side, eliciting a stifled grunt of pain. "Said I couldn't shock you and that you had to be awake. Didn't say I couldn't do anything else... so you just lay there and be still... like a good little credit chit." He scoffed as he planted the toe of his boot in her side again. "Not so much the fucking hero now, are ya?"

Shepard tried to be as still as she could, drawing slow, deep breaths in an attempt to ease the pain from the booted kicks to her unarmored ribs. Through the link, she could sense Liara's building resentment at her mistreatment. {Easy, Liara. Stay calm and keep your head... I'm gonna need you to have all your wits about you for this one. I don't want to end up in the sea with the fish and I can't exactly do much on my end... at least not yet.}

{You're right. I'm sorry, Sam... but I can't promise that I won't find that Batarian and rip him to shreds with my biotics when this is all over.}

{When this is over, Liara, I'll be more than happy to help you do just that. But, for now... back to our conversation. You were saying you think you know where we're headed?}

{Yes. Now that I know someone wants you alive, we can only be headed toward Pivaema... an island-based Republic roughly seventy-five kilometers offshore. I just can't imagine who is behind all this. I've got to prep the ground teams, Siame... but I'll be listening for you in case you need any more assistance.}

{Gráim thú, mo cheann geallta. I'll definitely be waiting for you. If you can, give me a heads up before you crash the doors. I'll help... if there's any way I can.}

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Shyria, Republic of Pivaema, Thessia

With the heavy bag still over her head, Shepard was somewhat disoriented as she stumbled along the hallway, prodded forward by the ever incessant slaver rod in the small of her back. She had been tagged numerous times during the move – whenever she hesitated, even in the slightest – but the rod's power setting had been reduced significantly and no longer sent her muscles into spasms. Now, it was simply used as motivation for her to keep moving... but even at the lower setting, the shocks still hurt.

Despite the distraction of the intermittent jolts of pain in her back, Shepard focused on assisting in her own rescue and had counted steps and marked left and right turns, relaying the information to Liara via the link as she was being ushered through the facility. They finally stepped into a lift that went up; Shepard counted the seconds as they climbed, hoping the data would give Liara some indication as to what floor they stopped on. When they reached their destination, Shepard immediately realized the information was likely unnecessary; it quickly became obvious they had been on a private
elevator that had ascended to the building's top floor penthouse. As soon as the doors of the lift opened, she was shoved unceremoniously out into the lobby, her Asari escort speaking crisply. "Tell the Boss we're here with her prize."

"Welcome back, Lieutenant, but you are kidding, aren't you?" The male voice had the diction and rapid-fire speech pattern of a Salarian and Shepard started to get a sinking feeling in her stomach as he added, "She's been pacing the floor in anticipation ever since you departed for the intercept. Go right in."

Shepard's flesh crawled at the idea that whoever was responsible for her kidnapping was so eagerly anticipating her arrival. Her mind was racing through the possibilities and her thoughts slipped through the link; she instantly received a comforting response. {Keep the faith, Siame... I promise you, we are not far behind.}

As the Asari lieutenant gripped Shepard's arm and yanked her forward, she addressed their Batarian escort. "You wait here."

Having none of it, he grabbed Shepard's other arm and growled back, "No way. We're the ones who baited and sprang the trap in order to capture her; now, she's here, she's alive, and she's conscious... just like you demanded. Shepard doesn't leave my sight until I get paid in full."

Shepard suddenly felt like a piece of meat being fought over by a couple of Varren; as she wondered who would win, the Asari's response to his challenge cut like sharp steel. "Binks. Give this slaver what he deserves, would you?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant."

Shepard flinched as the Batarian jerked on her arm; the very unexpected gunshot rang out much too close to her ear... only a fraction of a second before the grip slackened and slid away, followed by the heavy thud of an obviously dead Batarian. {Sorry, Blue. I'm pretty sure you wanted to take care of that one on your own... I hope you're not too disappointed.}

{I am not... but I am extremely relieved that they seem very eager to keep you alive.}

"Thanks, Binks." The Asari gave Shepard a second, more gentle, tug to indicate she should begin walking. "If you can get that mess cleaned up before I come back out, take half of what we would have paid the mistrustful four-eyed bastard as a bonus if he had simply managed to keep his damned mouth shut... and return the rest to the ops account."

The Salarian sounded much happier as he practically sang, "Consider it done, Lieutenant!"

They walked forward and entered the main office; the grip on her arm tightened the instant the door slid closed behind them and Shepard immediately thought she knew why. {Whoever this 'Boss' is, they fear her... I get the distinct impression my escort doesn't want to be here any more than I do.}

"Ah. Spectre Shepard. You have no idea how happy I am to see you again."

Shepard frowned under her hood, unable to see the speaker and unable to identify the voice, even while realizing it sounded much too familiar. "Can't exactly see you, so I won't say the same."

"Always so glib, Shepard. I suppose we'll have to remedy that." Her statement finished with a demented laugh the Spectre immediately recognized, her blood running cold at the thought. The Asari at her back yanked the hood off her head as Jona Sederis continued, "I still haven't forgotten about all of my Eclipse soldiers that you killed over the years. And then you had the audacity to give my organization to that Salarian toady, Sayn! I told you once before... when I got out... heads would
roll, Spectre." She laughed again and her next words were every bit as venomous as they had been the day Shepard elected to leave her in jail. "I suppose the promise I made that day doesn’t seem quite so empty now... does it?"

She turned her attention to the lieutenant. "Put her in the chair, Clarissa."

Without a word, someone shoved a chair against the back of Shepard’s legs and the lieutenant gave her a gentle push, causing her to fall backward into the seat. Another Salarian, not Binks, suddenly uncloaked to help fasten metal-meshed leather straps around her biceps and ankles, quickly followed with chest, wrist and thigh straps of the same basic design. The Spectre wasn’t too concerned, thinking it very likely the mesh was simply for additional strength, until he pulled out a second bundle of straps, all connected together with a wiring harness.

He flashed a quick smile as he opened one of the straps in front of her, showing her a series of thin, needle-like pins on the inside. "Hold still and the insertion won’t hurt much... I understand they are very like those used in a Human practice called acupuncture."

"Hey! This was a good pairs of pants!" Shepard angrily exclaimed as he began to cut away a section of her trousers across her thigh. He repeated the action at the base of her calf, then did the same on her other leg, completely ignoring her protests. Once the flaps of material were tucked back out of the way, he placed the first set of needles, very carefully, over the fleshy inside of Shepard's right forearm before pushing them quickly into her arm. He then anchored the straps into the arm of the chair, before completing the same process on her other forearm, using small buckles Shepard hadn’t previously noticed.

He then repeated the entire process, first on her thighs, then calves, and finally returning to her arms, where he sank the final two sets of needles into the bicep of each arm, quipping, "I'm glad it's summer... and that you were considerate enough to wear short sleeves for me today. Makes my job much easier." He then took the primary lead and Shepard heard the click as he plugged it into a machine attached to the back of the chair.

Immediately following that action, Shepard twitched lightly, suddenly feeling as though bugs were crawling across her skin. When the Salarian returned to her side and plugged a cord into the biotic suppression collar, the Spectre's eyes narrowed and she glared at the Asari. "What the fuck are you planning, Sederis?"

Jona Sederis smiled, but her voice resonated with disdain. "Oh. When you left me in that cage, I had nothing but time – a great amount of time – to plan my revenge, Shepard. The wiring harness controls the inputs for the needles, which are neural stimulators, sunk into various parts of your body so they can... converse... with your nervous system. They are linked as a series of matched pairs to ensure their commands travel up each arm, through your core and down the opposite leg... I wouldn't want to be responsible for denying you the pleasure of a complete, full-body experience."

She walked over and stroked Shepard's cheek with a surprisingly gentle caress. "You seem to be sweating, my dear Spectre. Did those tiny little needles hurt? I imagine your body is reacting to the calibration pulses the machine generates at start up... and the moisture on your skin will most likely enhance my enjoyment of the events to come."

Poking at Shepard's collar, she calmly continued her explanation, much like a teacher to a child. "This lovely, customized piece of your new ensemble will sense the instant your biotics begin to manifest... It was originally designed purely to ensure biotic slaves could not maintain the concentration necessary to actually do anything with their power. In this case, however, it has been modified specifically to handle your enhanced biotics, so you should feel special... very special indeed."
She dragged her finger across the Spectre's chest as she circled around behind the chair. "It is now a sensor that feeds bio-data to this lovely little generator behind you... which, in turn, controls the pulse frequency to all the stimulators that have been so elegantly connected to the network. The system is capable of producing a variety of sensory triggers that will race through your entire neural network at the speed of thought. In this particular case, it has been programmed for one primary function – the very singular purpose of inducing the sensation of extreme, intense pain." She smiled wickedly as she finished her quick circle, returning to face the front of the chair and bringing up a tiny singularity, spinning the small glowing ball in the tips of her fingers.

"The more power you attempt to pull in any futile efforts to escape the machine, the higher the pulse frequency will rise... and it will shut down your ability to utilize your biotics. I promise that it is capable of delivering a level of pain which even a Krogan would be unable to ignore; even a subject as strong-willed as you will be forced to accept its domination of your nervous system."

To demonstrate, she slowly moved closer and extended her arm, bringing the singularity closer to the collar around the Spectre's neck. Shepard felt a tingle start in her wrists that increased in intensity and climbed to her biceps as Sederis moved the glowing ball closer. The Asari quickly fed the singularity more power; as it grew substantially in size, the collar responded by sending extremely painful jolts up the Spectre's arms, across her chest, and down her legs... until she felt her heart skip and her head slammed against the back of the chair, the pulses surging through her body setting her nerves on fire. She grunted out, "Fuck! Made... your... point... Sederis!"

The Asari quickly reduced the strength of the singularity, as she didn't want Shepard to pass out quite yet, and stated, "Congratulations, Shepard. You have successfully completed the first step toward fully understanding your predicament." She then dropped her biotics entirely to pick up another wire that had yet to be connected. She grinned maliciously as she began to unbutton Shepard's shirt just under the high chest strap holding the Human's torso securely in place, exposing the bra beneath.

Shepard growled, "You're a perverted piece of shit, Sederis," as the Asari's hand slipped in to cup and fondle her concealed right breast. She gritted her teeth as Jona leaned in and blew into the bra cup, teasingly, and then harshly pinched the rising point.

Shepard grunted in pained surprise as Sederis pulled back and laughed. "So sensitive, Shepard. Your Asari toy, T'Soni, must absolutely love your responsiveness."

Jona then focused on the device at the end of the new wire, lifting it up on display so she could continue the Spectre's education. "This will monitor your heart rate for two very important reasons. Primarily, I want to make sure your heart keeps beating; after all, I wouldn't want to kill you... at least not too fast. Where's the fun in that? Seeing as there is little room for error when playing with the temperamental Human heart, it's all computer controlled; I cannot be too careful with such a fragile toy if I want to keep it around for awhile and extend my playtime." She winked at Shepard before continuing, "Second, I want to know the very instant your heart starts to accelerate in excitement... because that's when I will truly begin to enjoy myself."

Sederis reached in again, this time to nestle the heart monitor between the Spectre's breasts, the bra holding it securely in place against her chest. Shepard's voice was flat... emotionless... as she responded, "And just what am I supposed to get excited about?"

"Oh, Shepard. There are so many ways to get a heart racing. Fear. Anxiety. Pain. Sex." Sederis leaned down and attempted to plant a kiss on the Spectre's lips, gripping the sides of her head tightly with both hands while trying to keep Shepard from avoiding it. After a few unsatisfactory moments, Sederis pulled away in disgust. "Well. So much for that. And here I thought you liked Asari... but apparently the thought of kissing me won't do, so I'll simply have to skip to my next idea."
She turned to the lieutenant. "She obviously desires to make this as difficult as humanly possible on herself, so we'll change our approach. Please fetch victim number one."

As Clarissa practically ran from the room, Shepard huffed, "Victim number one? What the Hell, Sederis? You going to torture people in front of me until I get so damned angry I can't stand it?"

Sederis answered by drawing a long dagger from a sheath on the calf of her leathers. "Of course I am... but I guarantee they will be so much more than simply 'people' to you." As her words sunk in and Shepard slowly realized Sederis was most likely speaking of Fala and Molia, her tormentor placed the tip of the blade at the base of the Spectre's left ear as she continued, "But before that happens, I plan on drawing a sample of your lovely blood."

Shepard expected the insane Asari to remove her ear and gritted her teeth to keep from giving Sederis the satisfaction of hearing her crying out in pain. More out of surprise than anything else, she grunted at the stinging sensation caused by the exceptionally sharp blade traveling forward instead of up, barely slicing the skin along the base of her jaw until the tip was centered under the soft pocket of her chin, just inside the jaw bone. The hand holding the blade rotated downward and pushed the business end of the dagger slowly upwards, forcing Shepard to tilt her head up and back to keep from actually being impaled, stopping only when her head hit the back of the chair and she had nowhere else to go.

Shepard knew Liara was listening to her thoughts... and even though she didn't want to cause her any more concern, she couldn't stop herself from wondering how much longer she had to live – a quick, well-placed thrust could easily send the solid, surgically sharp dagger upward into her skull. The captain could feel the mental anguish of Liara's response, even as the Asari's carefully controlled thoughts came back through the link. {We must simply trust she did not lie about not wanting to kill you too quickly, Siame.}

The tip slid upward, penetrating just deep enough to draw a bead of blood before Sederis stopped its progress, leaving the blade in place to motivate the captain to hold her head extremely still. She then leaned forward and placed the earlier rejected kiss upon the Human's lips, merrily observing the resentful fury within the Spectre's eyes, flashing with anger and seemingly as cold as the ice within the Northern Sea. She pulled back from the kiss, an expression of smug satisfaction on her face, and smiled belligerently as she ran a blue finger agonizingly slowly up the blade, pushing it slightly deeper as she did so, changing the bead first to a dribble... then a tiny, steady stream. She waited, collecting a sufficient quantity of the Human's red blood as it dripped onto her finger before raising it to her tongue. After sticking her finger in her mouth and sucking it clean, she murmured, "Oh... now... that is something I have desired to taste since the day you left me to rot in prison, Shepard... It is soooo much sweeter than I ever anticipated."

After what seemed to be a very long, tense moment, the tip of the dagger finally dropped down and the Asari used the woman's cheek to wipe the remaining blood from the blade – just before back-handing the woman hard on the same side of her face, then laughing with abandon when the narrow slice she had created on the Spectre split open wide, to begin leaking blood the length of the Human's jaw. "I am very pleased to see you're not smiling anymore, Shepard. Nor are you quite so damned full of yourself as you were last time we met."

Jona shrugged nonchalantly. "Finally, it seems I truly am holding all the cards, Spectre. Here? Now? You have no choice but to endure my every whim! Humans. So shortsighted with your paltry century or so lifespan. All of you seriously need to learn how to play the long game, Shepard. Then again... never mind. None of you will ever live long enough to reap the benefits. Oh, how I simply love being Asari and having all the power!"
Shepard exhaled and inhaled rapidly – only then realizing she had held her breath the entire time the knife’s tip had been stuck in her chin – and swallowed hard as she felt the blood begin to trickle into the hollow at the base of her neck, feeling its warmth spread as it absorbed into the high collar of her shirt, the upper portion of which remained buttoned. Feeling utterly powerless to affect any change to her situation as both the stress and the constant low-grade tingle from the pins made her skin itch, Shepard continued to sweat. Her body’s involuntary reactions only increased the effectiveness of the device to which she was unwillingly connected as Sederis once more charged a small singularity and rolled it around on her fingertips... increasingly close to the sensor within the collar on the Spectre’s neck.

Sederis remained silent, sneering in gleeful, aberrant pleasure as the Human before her gasped in a desperate attempt to find a way – any way – to continue breathing as pain once again raced excruciatingly through her body, lasting until her heart rate climbed so high that the regulator on the machine shut down the neural stimulators. Exhausted and in absolute agony, Shepard was unable to suppress the groan that escaped her lips as she slumped in the chair, remaining seated only because of the restraints clamping her in position; otherwise she would have simply slipped to the floor like a boneless ragdoll.

Having adamantly refused to block the connection, no matter what she may be forced to endure via the link with Samantha, an extremely frustrated and nearly frantic Liara was beside herself as the events beyond her control continued to unfold on the top floor of the structure they had yet to enter. More than once, either Riana or Livos had found it necessary to grab Liara's arm to stop her from moving forward before the all clear signal was received. Finally, Sellis Boni, their infiltration specialist, appeared at the doorway and indicated it was safe to proceed into the building.

Using cloaking generators in order to avoid detection as long as possible while they moved purposely through the halls, Liara silently prayed to the Goddess that Jona Sederis didn't tire of her games before the Knight Shade’s First Team managed to make their way to the penthouse. They were not alone; should Liara's team be discovered, immediately upon their detection by the buildings security forces, Second Team was impatiently waiting at the ready. Led by Hailot Jatok and having placed a number of explosives at the entry, they would literally rip the front doors to pieces – along with a portion of the building’s wall surrounding the doors – making for quite the grand entrance when the time came. At worst, they would provide a monster-sized distraction for security; at best, they might just succeed in luring the majority of Sederis’ security teams to the ground floor in order to counter what they would have to recognize as a major Spectre assault.

First Team had progressed to within sight of the elevator when Liara rocked back on her heels, barely able to remain quiet as her hand flew to her cheek; feeling the pain of the blow to the side of her siame’s head infuriated her that much more. She felt Riana's steadying hand on her shoulder as Livos glanced back at her in concern. Unable to find the strength to remain standing, Liara sank to her knees and silently wept as Shepard's torment continued, recovering only after Shepard had slumped, unconscious, in the chair. Fearing the worst, Riana wrapped her arms around her charge and urgently whispered, "Mistress! What has happened?"

"We are out of time!" Wiping away tears as she resolutely regained her feet, the positively livid Asari hissed, "I am going to rip Jona Sederis limb for limb when we find her. Never again will she have an opportunity to threaten my family... or anyone else's... ever! Let's move!" Livos nodded quickly in understanding and returned her attention to what lay before them, guiding the team quickly toward the elevator as they continued their forward progress.
With a second big push of support from her leannán, Shepard regained awareness and growled from somewhere deep in her throat as she realized what had transpired while she was unconscious. The Lieutenant had returned to the room, escorting a beaten and bloodied Molia Tressi. She had likely been forced through the hallways in the collar and slave chains she was wearing – with a slaver rod at her back – the same as Shepard had been, seemingly forever ago. Sederis was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet while clapping excitedly, like a child at a birthday party. "Excellent! Shepard is awake again, so she can see that my new play toy is here!"

"Leave her alone, you psychopath!" Shepard's resistance was low and she wasn't thinking clearly as she instinctively pulled on her biotics. The end of her weak protest was forced as she exhaled the last word sharply, a new series of pulses igniting her nerve endings yet again... simultaneously constricting all the major muscles in her body, including her heart and lungs, as her entire body futilely attempted to pull back from the sensed pain.

"Oh, my!" Sederis' eyes lit up. "So, stubbornness prevails over wisdom and the famous Spectre isn't yet ready to surrender to the inevitable... How wonderful that you're actually living up to your reputation after so many have disappointed me in the past! You are going to be much more fun than I originally anticipated, Shepard."

The Spectre hung her head in abject guilt; the Tressi family had already suffered tragedy as a result of her actions, the eldest of the three sisters having been killed previously – with Benezia on Noveria – and now it seemed as though the youngest would share her sister's fate of a premature demise.

Sederis believed she had found the leverage she needed to torment the Spectre without having to utilize her own biotic power to stimulate the collar and cuffs on Shepard's body. Grinning malevolently, she turned to her Lieutenant. "Put her on her knees before me." Shepard instantly knew she had made a mistake by revealing that weakness to Sederis and struggled to keep her emotions in check as her heart hammered painfully in her chest.

Clarissa nodded and yanked the chain unexpectedly, throwing the overwhelmed Molia off balance and sending her crashing face first to the floor. The Lieutenant immediately took a position at her side as Molia weakly attempted to rise, holding down on the commando's shoulders to keep her from rising any further than a kneeling position. The second of Sederis' minions moved from his place behind the chair controls, bringing the slaver rod to bear on the commando's side, who immediately screamed in pain and ceased her struggles, glaring at Sederis as she spit out, "Do your worst, Ardat!"

"Oh, I have every intention of doing just that, my sweet little morsel." Sederis' face held a malicious grin as she placed the point of her dagger against Molia's chest. The commando attempted to lean into it, but the Salarian beside her yanked back on her leash and jabbed the rod against her body one more time, this time at the sensitive middle of her lower back, causing Molia to arch back in pain as yet another scream erupted from deep in her throat.

As she did so, Sederis plunged the blade quickly into the helpless Asari's abdomen and wrenched it sideways. As Molia shrieked again and jerked away, her exposed organs began to slip out onto the floor. The lieutenant released her and stepped away as Molia fell to the side, writhing in agony. Sederis cocked her head and watched, emotionless as she muttered, "I've always heard gut wounds are an excruciatingly painful way to die, but I've never observed such in person."

A rattling sound caught Sederis' attention so she hurriedly shifted her gaze to the captain; it was easy to see that the woman's skin – already lighter toned than most humans Sederis had encountered – had gone amazingly pale, even though her entire body was surrounded by a faint blue glow. No sounds escaped Shepard's clenched jaw but it was obvious by the violent shaking of the chair that, even with the Spectre's body movement restricted by numerous restraints, her muscles were spasming rather
brutally as she was bombarded by rapid-fire stimulation pulses.

Sederis growled, "Damn! I knew I wanted to witness the start of the blue glow the first time you made a serious attempt to utilize your biotics to stop me!" Her head canted slightly to the side as she watched the show and she began to smirk in satisfaction. "Though... I never imagined just how stubborn you could be... just how much power you would attempt to bring forth before the system finally shut you down, Shepard. I must admit you are putting on quite the performance."

When the series of pulses finally stopped, Shepard's head fell forward, her chin resting on her chest as she struggled to draw ragged, gasping breaths.

Sederis, surprised the Spectre had somehow managed to stay conscious through such painful torture, sauntered over and slowly dragged the tip of her dagger across Shepard's right cheek, leaving a blood trail on the opposite side of her head from the first cut... from the corner of her mouth to the back of her cheekbone. "You are a skilled practitioner of war... Spectre. Tell me. Does a gut wound truly hurt as much as they say?"

Angry at the Asari's proclivity to be so cruel, an undeniably fatigued Shepard stubbornly lifted her head to glare at her, only to see that her dark blue face held a curious grin. She actually expects an answer to that question! A disgusted Shepard panted, "You are truly one sick fuck, Sederis!" She struggled against her restraints and an arc of blue power appeared at her hands—only to reward her with another short series of neural pulses that mercilessly fired her pain receptors yet again. This time, Shepard was unable to contain a loud groan of pain... followed by her chin once more dropping to her chest as she slurred together, "Godsbedamned," when the agonizing stimulation finally subsided.

It appeared to Sedaris that Shepard was finally losing her ability to resist and the current day's session of torturous entertainment was nearing its end. Meanwhile, the mortally wounded Molia's struggles on the floor continued to grow weaker as she gasped for air, hardly able to breathe through her own excruciating pain. Growing bored with the weakening Spectre, Sederis returned to the dying commando's side and roughly grabbed her crests, jerking her head around so her face pointed toward Shepard. "Enjoy your last look at the savior of the galaxy... and know that it is her pride... her fucking arrogance... that has brought you to this point. Any last words?"

Sederis saw the dying Asari's lips move but couldn't hear so she leaned closer. "Sorry... I couldn't hear your pitiful attempts at speech. Can you repeat that, please?"

{Hang on, Samantha. We are nearly there!}

Shepard would never know what Molia Tressi said, as Sederis suddenly flew into a rage, jerked the commando's head back and ripped the blade of her dagger across Molia's throat in one fierce swipe. Emboldened by Liara's imminent arrival, even though her muscles felt like jelly and she could barely breathe through the pain, the captain forced herself to laugh. As Jona spun around to glare at her, Shepard spoke quietly, scarcely able to get the words past her lips. "So like you... reckless... impulsive... You gave... exactly what she wanted... quick release... from pain... T'Soni commandos... not stupid, Sederis. Only regret... not knowing... what she said... Care to tell?"

The ex-mercenary leader raised her arm and suddenly shouted, "Give me that slaver's stick!" As the second Asari hastened to comply, the intrusion alarm began blaring a warning; this caused the thoroughly enraged Asari to begin poking angrily at her omnitool rather than striking or stabbing at Shepard with the rod. She nearly screamed the question, "What's going on out there?" She then glared ominously at the Spectre while waiting for a reply.

A panicked voice came back, "A damned Krogan Commander just blasted his way through the front
door! He's leading a full squad! They seem to know the layout of the building better than we do... They are headed in your direction and they all have Spectre insignia on their armor!"

"So stop them!" Sederis glowered at Shepard; the blind hatred she held for this miserably troublesome Human who had cost her so much was blatantly obvious in her eyes and body language – the very idea of being interrupted in her quest for vengeance had instantly thrown her into an even more foul temper.

"It's too late!" came Binks' panicked reply. "The elevator's opening... They're already here!"

Frustrated beyond measure, Sederis shrieked, "Goddess be damned! I'll not be cheated of my revenge because I have a bunch of incompetent idiots working for me!" Now in a blind, mindless rage, Jona Sederis gave not a single thought toward either assisting Binks or making good on an escape. Instead, as the door of her inner sanctum began to slide open, she angrily tossed the slaver's rod aside and once more drew her dagger. Sederis lunged at Shepard with a ferocious, primal growl just as Liara T'Soni – her combat-trained body aglow in shifting shades of deepest blue biotic energy – blasted into the room.

The Shadow Broker rapidly extended her arm to launch a monstrous warp, packing every bit of her pent up wrath and fury into the effort. As the warp left her fingertips, Liara's mouth twisted in rage as she screamed, "Get away from her, you bitch!"
Reprisal and Recovery

Chapter Notes

Ardat - demon (Source: CDN)

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

Grá mo chroí - love of my heart (Gaelic)

Gráim thú - I love you (Gaelic)

GST - Galactic Standard Time, standardized time system utilized by inhabitants of Citadel Council Space

Hobbles - device that limits movement by tethering feet together with a short strap or chain

Ionúin Álайнn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Leannán - Lover (Gaelic)

Mo cheann geallta - My promised one (Gaelic)

Nara - literally "bearer"; one who shoulders another's burden, aids others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Rebekha - guardian, protector; literally "watcher of the night" (Source: CDN)

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

XO - Executive Officer

Shyria, Republic of Pivaema, Thessia – 5 Jul 2188

Jona Sederis was so intent on driving her dagger deep into Shepard's chest before anyone could intervene, she didn't even think of dodging, activating any type of shield or bringing up a barrier to protect herself. Liara launched her exceptionally powerful warp, which flew across the room like a guided missile, where it crashed into the fanatic Asari in the middle of her lunge; the intensity of the warp going through her body literally ripped her apart at the molecular level before she even realized she'd been struck.

The jellied remains of Sederis' body were mostly contained within her leathers as the warp's momentum threw her backwards to strike the wall on the far side of the room with an incredible amount of force, the former Eclipse leader slumping to the floor in a pile of tangled limbs. Liara's victory had been incredibly swift but, had circumstances provided any other option, she most certainly would have altered her approach had she realized the effect her use of biotics would have on Shepard.
Shepard's world slipped into frighteningly slow motion as the Spectre watched Sederis begin her leaping attack, the imposing dagger leading the Asari's body by a full arm's extension. She closed her eyes and steeled herself against the impact she knew was coming... hoping beyond reason that, in her rabid anger, the lunatic's aim would be off and the blade would not strike home to be buried to the hilt in the center of her heart.

The instant Liara burst into the room, power gathered to a level she hadn't held since she had shattered Javik against the bulkhead on the Normandy, Shepard felt her wrists start to tingle. Fully aware of the supremacy of her Ioniún Álainn's power at its upper limits – particularly when Liara was motivated by Shepard's life hanging in the balance – the Spectre instinctively knew what was coming and immediately clamped down on her thoughts, not wanting to distract her Leannán from doing what needed to be done.

The warp that blasted through the room barely cleared Samantha's left shoulder as it whipped past the Spectre to intercept Sederis. Due to the warp's immense power, the sensor in Shepard's collar immediately triggered the controller on the back of the chair... which instantly ramped up the pulse frequency to the fastest cycle rate it was capable of producing. The corresponding signal from the controller then simultaneously activated every single stimulator connected to the Spectre's body which, in turn, immediately caused her entire neural net to react, sending nearly every muscle within her body into spasm from the intense pain.

With the biotic war raging in the room around her, the stimulators continued to activate the multiple receptors throughout her body, her own nervous system being used against her. As the electrochemical waves flashed through her shoulders and crisscrossed her chest, her jaw locked and her fists clenched as tightly as they physically could in violent reaction to the induced agony. Though she wanted to, with the intense pain paralyzing her entire body, the Spectre was not even able to breath, much less scream.

Her head crashed against the back of the chair as the unrelenting pulses flashed downward, past her hips, through the needles on her thighs and into her calves. Like everything else along the transit line, the muscles in her legs immediately spasmed and cramped as she tensed against every strap keeping her locked into a sitting position. After the initial, excruciating surge, her entire body strained against the restraints, driven by an involuntary reflex to curl into a protective fetal position... and beyond, had it been at all physically possible.

Shepard groaned in quiet agony as the muscles in her abdomen contracted viciously and she felt a rib, previously fractured by the booted kick of the Batarian slaver, suddenly give way and snap – the only true success of her body's attempt to collapse in upon itself. The rib's painful shift within her torso elevated the torment beyond her ability to endure and Shepard finally slipped into a state of blissful oblivion, just as her heart fluttered on the brink of arrhythmia. The heart rate sensor tucked in her bra immediately cut off the power to the neural stimulator, ending the current session, but Shepard was past the point of caring.

Liara cried out and crashed to her knees immediately after she released the warp, one hand on the floor and the other clapping at the armor plating over her chest, feeling as if someone had violently reached through her ribcage and attempted to rip her heart from her body. Livos and her team had rushed into the room behind Liara and were busy dealing with Clarissa and the unnamed Salarian... but Riana immediately flew to Liara's side. "Mistress! What is wrong?"

Kneeling on the floor with her body folded over by only an echo of the agony her siame was experiencing, tears streamed down Liara's face as she groaned in pain and gasped, "Shepard! Help Shepard!" Riana was torn between helping her mistress and doing what she was told when Liara released the grip on her own chest plate to reach up and shove Riana away. "Go!" The throbbing
pain coming through the link was nearly overwhelming, leaving Liara with barely enough strength to keep from collapsing the rest of the way to the floor, much less get to her feet to aid her *siame*.

Suddenly realizing Liara’s distress must be originating from the link, Riana sprang to her feet and hustled to the chair, finding the Spectre slumped over against her restraints. "By the grace of the Goddess... be alive, Shepard!" She whispered the prayer as she swiftly laid her first two fingers against the pulse point on Shepard's neck, having found the method to be faster than queuing up the medical scanner on her omnitool. Breathing a sigh of relief upon finding a racing but steady beat beneath her fingertips, she sent the emergency evacuation notice to the *Knight Shade* and promptly set to undoing the first buckle of the band on Shepard's forearm. For some reason, the strap would not release its grip on Shepard's skin so Riana tugged on it, causing the woman's arm to bleed when the *needles* lining its inner surface ripped the skin as she pulled the strap away.

"Goddess! What has that *Ardat* done to you, *Nara*?" Having not realized the needles were there, revulsion flooded her mind as she carefully undid the strap's second buckle so she could pull the needles straight out and not cause any more injury than what had already been done. Now knowing the design of the restraints on her captain's extremities, Riana was more careful, greatly reducing the damage done to Shepard's flesh during the remaining extractions.

With all the augmentations in her body, Shepard was unusually heavy for a Human of her size, so only after Riana had removed or unplugged every piece connected to the wiring harness did she begin to undo the meshed leather restraints, saving the chest strap for last. Having taken notice of the slave collar on the woman's neck during the process, Riana dared not utilize her biotics to carry the woman, knowing it would likely result in getting them both shocked –something Shepard certainly did not need in her condition. Instead, Riana gently slid the Spectre from the chair and eased her to the floor before activating the medical program in her omnitool.

With Shepard unconscious, Liara managed to catch her breath and stand, moving shakily to Riana's position to once more sink to her knees, this time at her *siame's* side. Tears still on her cheeks, she turned glassy blue eyes to her First. "How is she?"

Riana looked at the results of the scanner and rattled out, "According to my scans, her nervous system has undergone significant stress and she is suffering from extreme dehydration and low electrolytes, sodium and potassium. She has also experienced a number of episodes of an irregular heartbeat, likely caused by multiple, severe muscle contractions... Her heart was racing when I first got to her, but is gradually slowing to a more normal rhythm. Getting her out of the chair and keeping her prone should continue to help stabilize her heart rate and regulate her blood pressure."

"Mistress." Riana's eyes came up to meet Liara's as the First growled her next words. "We have witnessed Shepard blowing through suppression cuffs before; a standard slaver collar is not powerful enough to cause these symptoms." Her gaze flicked angrily to the chair in which Shepard had been strapped and she stabbed an angry finger in its direction as she turned back to Liara and continued, "The bindings of that... *torture* chair... where she was confined contained pins that were inserted into her body. I do not yet understand their function, but they were all wired to the box on the back of the chair and I can only assume it contains some type of control system that regulated... whatever they did... to Shepard."

Thinking back on their final run through the Citadel to end the war, Riana shook her head in disgust as she continued, "Based on her unconscious state, it must have been agonizing to endure, because I have watched Shepard suffer immense levels of trauma and pain before she reached such a point, Mistress." She paused and turned a remorseful gaze on Liara as she reached for her mistress' hand, "It is an extremely evil device... and I cannot be certain... but your warp passed very close to her shoulder and neck... and the slaver collar, which was also plugged into the system. The devices
were tied together and I believe your warp activated the collar; the control circuit likely interpreted the energy as Shepard pulling up her own biotics..."

"Oh merciful Goddess!" Liara's expression turned to one of nearly overwhelming guilt as she squeaked out, "You're saying I caused this?" The possibility that she had almost killed her Promised was too much to bear and she collapsed in grief, draped over Shepard as she wept uncontrollably, mumbling words of apology between her sobs and gasps for breath.

Riana moved quickly to grasp Liara by the shoulders, leaning over her to whisper into her ear, "Absolutely not, Liara! You may have caused the latest episode, but it was only the last of many since she was placed in that chair... and your actions were necessary to save her life!" Riana sensed the Asari's sobs were softening, so continued, "Had you not acted as you did... Shepard would most certainly be dead... as a result of Sederis' dagger biting deep into the middle of her chest. You did what needed to be done and Shepard will thank you for it!"

Liara sat up and angrily spat out, "She will be thankful for being alive, but how can she possibly thank me for..." Her eyes turned back to the very still form of her siame – showing absolutely no signs of regaining consciousness – and waved her hands in frustration as she finished, "...this?"

"Because otherwise she would be dead." Riana frowned at her. "You saved her life, Mistress."

Livos and her team had finished dealing with Clarissa and the Salarian, so the four commandos arranged themselves to stand guard over their mistress and her captain while Livos and Tra'ana Iremi prepared the body of Molia Tressi for transport. Livos was also conversing with Hailot Jatok and monitoring the progress of the second team when a relieved smile crossed her face. She walked over to Liara quickly, the smile disappearing as the young Asari, an anguished expression on her damp, tear-streaked face, looked up at the new arrival.

The Team One Lead knelt quickly at her side and glanced at what she suddenly feared was Shepard's corpse, only to breathe a sigh of relief and whisper a quick thanks to the Goddess when she noted the slow rise and fall of the captain's chest. "Liara. How is Nara?"

The overwhelming guilt Liara felt for Shepard's condition made it impossible for her to speak, so she simple hung her head in remorse as Riana answered for her, relaying the same information the First had so recently passed to their mistress with the addition of, "... and the medical evacuation team is enroute. They should be here momentarily."

"Yes, I know. I've been in communication with Jatok and they are escorting the team to our location. They are coming up the back way, via the slave quarters, so will be entering soon through the rear entrance to the Penthouse..." She pointed in the general direction of the doorway. "...which is back in that corner. The good news is they freed a number of slaves as they cleared out Sederis' troops... and Fala was among them. She is coming with them and bringing the keys required to get those disgusting slave devices off of Shepard."

As if on cue, the rear door flew open, Commander Jatok leading the charge with his booming voice. "Where's Captain Shepard?" Surveying the room quickly he pointed at the small group by the chair. "There! Get that stretcher over there and let's get everyone home!"

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Knight Shade, Thessia, At Large

The return trip to the Estate would be extremely short and Lusmeni had the engines hot, lifting off even before the outer hatch had fully closed and locked. The Knight Shade's doctor, Derek Yandle,
didn't even bother relocating Shepard to the medical bay, much less a bed, opting instead to simply keep her in the decontamination chamber immediately inside the ship's entryway. "It's a sterile environment and the trip is shorter than the time it would take us to get her relocated and settled into a bed. I'd rather use the time to get an eezo-infused electrolyte-saline drip started to help her rehydrate and replenish her reserves while I monitor her condition."

Much to Liara's disgruntlement, he chased everyone else out. "All of you need to get out of your gear, secure it in the appropriate lockers and get some energy bars, along with eezo cubes as appropriate, into your system. When Liara hesitated, he stared her down and spoke respectfully, but firmly, to the lady of the house. "That goes for you as well, Doctor T'Soni. I know how worried you are, but Captain Shepard will recover from this... quickly, I imagine... so at least get cleaned up and changed while enroute or I'll have Doctor T'Lori put you on a mandatory bed rest period as soon as we arrive at the Estate. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Derek, you do." Liara scrubbed her forehead with her fingertips and sighed. "Take good care of her for me?"

He nodded and replied, "Of course," as he promptly ushered her out and set to work.

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia

Lusmeni barely got the ship up to speed before they were decelerating for a landing at the docks; the Estate doctor, Alyna T'Lori, met them at the hatch and discussed Shepard's condition with both Derek and Riana as they moved her to the medical facility. Once there, Alyna paused outside the door to speak with Liara. "I know you want to be at her side, but let us perform a full medical evaluation first. As soon as we're done and she's truly settled in, I swear Derek or I will come speak with you to discuss her condition. We can't give you any more details until the exam is complete."

Her focus shifted to Riana. "Your job is to scan Lady Liara's blood eezo levels and make sure she eats whatever is appropriate between now and then. Understood?" With a nod from Riana, Alyna vanished into the clinic.

It wasn't long before Riana had returned with a plate from the kitchens, along with two eezo cubes sitting prominently on the tray. Liara ate the eezo cubes before consuming anything else, since that would probably be the first thing Alyna would ask about; she then began working on the main dinner, which consisted of a rather simple seafood salad. She was very nearly done when a smiling Derek stuck his head out the door. "The exam is complete and Shepard is asking to see you."

Liara practically threw the food tray at Riana as she eagerly jumped up from her chair. "She's awake?"

"Not sure how she'd request your presence if she wasn't," Derek chuckled. "But, before we go in, you need to know a couple of things. The machine Shepard was connected to was a neural stimulator, programmed to target pain receptors in her body. The pain intensity caused severe cramping of her muscles and the heart fluctuations she experienced... as well as spasms of her diaphragm, which manifested as shortness of breath and lightheadedness. I'm actually quite surprised she kept it together as long as she did to continue link communications with you."

A distressed frown on her face, Liara responded, "Thank you, Derek... I'll certainly keep all of that in mind. May I go in now?"

He smiled softly and continued, "Not quite yet, Liara. You also need to know the depletion of
essential minerals from her system has caused bouts of tingling, numbness, and burning pain as a result of random and unpredictable cramping throughout her body. Don't be offended if she unexpectedly yanks a hand away or seems to grimace at something you say. She is likely experiencing a muscle spasm and it will pass; it will get better as the drip replaces those missing elements."

"His growing impatience made itself known as the Asari shifted nervously back and forth between one foot and the other as she made a short query. "Now?"

"He glanced at his notes before adding, "There's one more thing. Don't be put off by the burn mark on her neck and the rashes on her extremities; they are a result of the slaver's lash and those nasty pins they jammed into her... and we did only preliminary treatments with the exam. We have yet to start her dermal regenerative care but figured we could let you speak with her before we started the noncritical treatments... We'll then turn out the lights so she can rest while her nanites finish the job.""

"Of course. Thank you." Liara looked longingly at the entry as she asked, "Would it be possible for me to stay with her?"

"I just knew you were going to ask that." Derek heaved a heavy sigh. "The random muscle spasms make physical contact inadvisable. They'll lessen as her mineral and electrolyte levels return to normal and her nanites should help speed that process overnight, so let's see how she's doing in the morning, shall we?" The sad face before him made him smile understandingly and add, "Alright. Come on. Let's go visit and see how she reacts while you're there."

They walked in and Liara's eyes immediately met those of Samantha, obviously waiting for her arrival with the back of her bed raised so she could rest comfortably while visiting with her promised. Shepard smiled weakly as her Ionúin Álainn entered the room and breathed, "Liara."

In spite of being advised against contact, Shepard reached out and grabbed Liara's hand as soon as the Asari was close enough to the bed. Liara glanced at the doctor who simply stood there shaking his head. "I'm beginning to better understand some of Karin Chakwas' warnings about the two of you." He scratched his head and turned to walk away, saying over his shoulder, "Just don't say I didn't warn you."

Shepard's face held one of her lopsided grins and Liara couldn't help but giggle as she sat in the chair placed beside the bed. She didn't try to grip the hand holding hers, allowing Samantha the freedom to easily break contact should it become suddenly painful. Her brow furrowed and she asked, "How are you... really?"

"Tired... but alive, thanks to you." Shepard shook her head and sighed softly as Liara looked away. "Hey, you. I had closed my eyes... knowing that Sederis was about to kill me and having no desire to watch it happen, as I was completely helpless to stop her. But I knew it was you who blasted through the door behind me... I felt the charge building in the air and instantly knew one of your super-warps was on its way. I could only hope that it got there in time to stop that lunatic – and it did just that, so don't you dare feel guilty for any of the repercussions caused by that infernal machine; you kept Sederis from burying that damned dagger in my heart." She chuckled lightly as she continued, "Which is good... because the only one that has any dibs on my heart is you, Liara. Well... except maybe my Mom." She squeezed the blue hand she held in hers. "Look at me. Please?"

As Liara's teary eyes once again met hers, Shepard smiled. "Thank you."

"Samantha... I nearly killed you!" Liara hissed in her vehemence to condemn her own actions.
"You did no such thing... You were my Rebekha, Liara. If it had been left to Sederis, she definitely would have killed me." Shepard answered the hiss with a calming whisper. "If you had delayed to try something else... anything else that didn't involve biotics..." She stopped and sighed. "This is silly. Reopen the link and see it from my point of view, Grá mo chroí. I am happy to share the memory, because it's a good one as far as I'm concerned." She chuckled and then grimaced, pulling her hand back and opening and closing both her fists a couple of times before shaking them in front of her. "Damn it."

Concerned, Liara leaned closer and looked into Shepard's eyes, shadowed in pain.

"How bad is it? Do you need Alyna or Derek?" Liara had to resist the urge to reach out and hold Shepard to comfort her.

Shepard rolled her shoulders and shook her hands one more time before relaxing again. "No... I'm good. The sensations don't last long... and they seem to be decreasing in frequency and intensity."

In that moment, Liara made her decision. "Sam, let me see it." She reached her hand out and placed it on the side of the bed where Shepard could touch it when she was ready for physical contact again. "And I'm not talking about your hand... or just the end, when the team entered the room..."

She gulped and shuddered as she continued, "I want to see... to experience... everything you went through."

Shepard's gut reaction was to shout out a resounding 'No!'; instead, she drew a deep breath and held it for a moment as she thought about her answer. "Liara. Sederis was anything but kind. She teased and taunted... She brutally murdered Molia right in front of me." Shepard suddenly stopped and a pained solemnity swept over her face. "Oh, Gods. Has anyone spoken to Alestia... told her about Molia?"

Tears came to Liara's eyes yet again as she answered, "Yes. Captain Tremi and Livos went together to tell her the unfortunate news. She wants to speak with you when you are recovered... and I think you should show me first and let me share the burden. Then, when you are ready, we can go to her together, as Lyria and Livos did."

Shepard leaned back against the bed and closed her eyes. "I need to think about that, Liara."

"No, you don't, Samantha." Liara whispered, taking a chance and leaning in so she could reach her siame's hand, gently laying hers upon the Spectre's fingers. "We have no secrets, remember? And this is a big one that would eat at your soul. We need to share it, just as we shared the death of my mother... and Dezzi Tressi."

"You're right, of course." Shepard moved her hand to place it on top of the one offered, curling her fingers to wrap around Liara's. "I love you, Liara. Thank you again for saving my life and resetting my compass when I began to take a wrong turn. I... accept your offer... and would be thankful to have you at my side when I go to speak with Alestia."

Liara's free hand came up and closed on Shepard's cheek, but she resisted the temptation and didn't touch, speaking to explain her hesitation. "I want to hold you close... to feel your heart beat with mine... to truly know you are here... alive within as well as physically, but I am afraid of causing a spasm."

Shepard smiled softly and turned her head to intercept Liara's hand, nuzzling gently against it before turning to place a kiss on a blue palm.

Liara's brow pinched. "You asked me to open the link... and you will open completely on your end,
as well, and show me what I need to know?"

Shepard nodded and answered without hesitation. "Yes."

It was roughly a half-hour later when Alyna returned from dinner to check on her patient. She stood in the doorway, hands on her hips in consternation. "I thought we decided to instruct them to have no physical contact?"

"They started by holding hands... no. Fingertips. They held fingertips. Shepard had one very minor episode and when it passed... then they held hands and opened their link," came a quiet reply. "After only a few moments of their private communication, Shepard slid over and Liara climbed in before I could stop her." Derek simply shrugged his shoulders as he continued quietly, "They've been like that since, with zero repeat episodes. I don't know if it's Shepard's nanites or the link with Liara that heals her faster... but Karin Chakwas warned me things like this would happen and the only way she successfully kept them apart was to physically lock one or the other out of the med bay." His eyes finally shifted from the sleeping couple to his fellow physician. "Are you prepared to do that to a bonding pair, Ally?"

Alyna rolled her eyes and shook her head in resignation. "No, I suppose not... At least not until their actions prove detrimental." She chuckled softly and joined Derek on the couch in the small office area. "I hate to wake them, but the treatments for her wounds should not wait any longer than necessary... They will certainly alleviate more of the pain and ensure Shepard gets what I assume will be an excellent night's sleep." A doting smile snuck onto her face as she continued, "They really are rather cute together, aren't they?"

At that, Derek laughed, knowing both of them were going to be just fine... and that his thoughts applied not only to the House's leading couple... but to the two doctors who had recently signed on to serve them. "Yes, they are... but you're also correct about having to wake them. We need to finish Shepard's treatments or she's going to scar."

They stood and moved to the bed, waking Liara first, who only reluctantly slid from the comfort of Shepard's arms before asking, "Do what you must, but may I remain during the treatment?"

"Certainly, Liara." Alyna looked to Derek and saw no disagreement in his eyes, so continued, "There is nothing about the procedures that would preclude you being here." She inserted a needle into the drip-line and injected an anesthetic before shifting her attention to Derek, asking, "Upper or lower?"

He chuckled softly as he answered, "I'm a leg man, myself," as he picked up a surgical wand and moved towards Shepard's feet, gently lifting her right leg at the knee and beginning the dermal regeneration treatment on her calf.

Liara moved around the bed and stood at Samantha's right side as her lover woke with a light groan from the unexpected movement. Gently stroking the Human's cheek, she smiled down upon her leannán. "It's okay, Sam. It's time for your treatments... but I'll not leave your side, I swear it."

Drawing a sleepy breath, she queried, "Wha' time's it?"

"We slept less than thirty minutes. It is still Saturday evening, Siame."

Waking more fully, Shepard chuckled lightly, "Hell of a way to spend a Saturday night, Li. We seriously need to work on that."

Smiling bashfully in return, Liara responded, "I agree wholeheartedly, Sam."
Alyna stood across from the young Asari, smirking as she stated, "If you two are done, I'd like to get started on Shepard's facial cuts... unless, of course, you want them to scar." The pair immediately fell silent, Liara blushing lightly as the captain smiled and tipped her head to the right so Alyna had better access to the slice that had run along her left jawbone. The doctors had already sealed all her wounds; Alyna simply wanted to speed the dermal generation along to prevent it from leaving a permanent mark that would remind Shepard of her abduction every time she looked into a mirror. "Thank you, Captain. That makes this much easier... now, all you need to do is hold still and not talk."

Between Liara's soothing presence, the warmth of the medical wand, and the gradual influx of the anesthesia, Shepard's eyes slid closed; it wasn't long before her chest rose and fell with the rhythm of sleep. Pulling a chair close to the bed, Liara sat down and relief flooded her system as she watched the doctors work, the marks left behind from the day's events finally becoming things of the past. Warm tears trickled down her cheeks as she peered lovingly at the woman asleep before her. Will this ever end? Will there always be people trying to take away our dreams of peace and a future?

"You alright, Liara?" Derek's question interrupted her reverie and she looked up quickly.

"Yes. Of course." Wiping the tears from her cheeks she almost laughed. "I'm sorry. Karin was used to my emotions when it comes to Shepard. I forget you have not known us nearly as long and it may come as a surprise to you but being linked as we are, our connection runs deep... so it pains me when she is hurt."

"I wouldn't expect it to be otherwise, Liara." Alyna paused for a moment, observing the younger Asari as she continued, "It's only natural to feel that way when we see someone we know and love get injured. There is nothing regarding such feelings that you should be worried about... yet I sense a deep uneasiness within you. What is it you fear?"

"It is not fear, Alyna." Liara's expression was earnest as she met the doctor's eyes. "You have to understand the pain I feel is not limited strictly to an emotional connection. If I am either unprepared or purposely keeping the link wide open, I will feel her pain physically... and it has driven me to my knees more than once."

She read the surprise on the doctor's face before she refocused on Shepard, reaching over to run her fingers through the Human's hair. "Today was one of those days so, even though I was not there to see them happen, I know only too well the agony she suffered receiving these injuries."

"That is..." Alyna's forehead pinched in both consternation and concern. "I have never heard of such a thing."

"You are not alone in that. The phenomenon is called Inanna; a term I did not know either, until it happened... and Consort Sha'ira explained its meaning, effects and potential to both of us." Warmth spread through Liara's chest as she thought about everything else their special connection brought along with it. "Without a doubt, it is most definitely more a blessing than a curse and, now that I have experienced it, I would never wish it to be otherwise. Our link is very special, as it brings us a closeness like none other."

The love with which Liara spoke stilled Alyna's protest before it left her lips; the younger Asari positively glowing as she doted over her Promised made her reconsider her next words. "So... can you turn it off, if necessary?"

"Yes." Liara looked up to once more meet the physician's eyes. "I can set up a mental barrier and block her out, if required... and she's capable of doing the same, though we try our best to make that unnecessary."
Derek spoke again for the first time since Liara's explanation began. "I, for one, think such a connection would be a wonderful thing to experience... Humans don't normally have that option – even with an Asari mate, we can't be the one to initiate a meld – so, I imagine it is very special from Shepard's perspective as well." He looked at Liara, pure joy in his expression as he said, "I wish you both a long life together, filled with happiness."

"Absolutely," added Alyna. "My curiosity is purely clinical. Personally, I do not doubt they will live in extended bliss." She gave Derek a playful wink. "Especially with the two of us caring for them both."

"Speaking of which..." Derek turned off his medical wand and stepped back. "... I'm done."

"Well then." His associate gestured at Shepard's right arm. "If you can convince Liara to move out of the way, you can work on those punctures... as I am sure you have nothing better to do. I am done with her face and left arm, but I'd like to return my attention to the burn on her neck. It is being rather stubborn and I want to see if I can clean it up a bit better."

Liara stood as soon as she heard her name and moved the chair out of the doctor's way before circling around to stand at Alyna's side. "This is not the first lash burn she's had; she received her first from a Cerberus Dragoon class trooper while we were on Cronos Station. Does that matter?"

"That is good information to know, but it should not matter. Was it just as hard to heal the first time?" Alyna continued working as they spoke.

"Harder. The Dragoon was very good at what he did and wrapped the lash around Shepard's neck like a whip, both shocking her and cutting off her air at the same time." Liara's voice picked up an angry growl as she finished, "He was dragging her backward with the damned thing... wrapped so tight around her neck it was choking her. I blasted him with a warp, but treatment was delayed because we were still in the heat of battle."

"Ahhh," Derek sighed, knowingly. "So it was more severe and also had time to swell and blister. That had to have been nasty."

"It was." Liara looked once more at Shepard's neck. "Comparatively speaking, this is just a scratch." A small smile began to appear on her face as both doctors chuckled quietly. "If she was awake, Shepard would surely comment on my developing dry humor."

He couldn't help himself and Derek's quiet chuckle burst forth into full blown laughter. "This is a story I'll have to relate to Karin. I'm sure she'll enjoy the tale."

"Yes, she will; but only because Shepard is going to recover in full."

As Derek finished up with Shepard's bicep, he once again stepped back. Alyna saw his movement and looked up, also turning off her dermal regenerator. "Okay. Enough for tonight. We'll let her nanites work on it overnight and do some touch up in the morning, if required. If there is a scar, it shouldn't be very visible."

Liara looked down at the woman on the table and smiled. "I suppose I'll leave her to rest and grab some dinner." She looked up, her eyes traveling between the two doctors. "May I join her later?"

Derek laughed again as Alyna rolled her eyes in defeat. "Yes, Liara. Just remember we'll be taking turns checking on her tonight, so your sleep may be disturbed. You'd sleep better in your own room."

Liara grinned and shook her head, answering with conviction, "No, Derek. I wouldn't."
Resolutions

Chapter Notes

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

GST - Galactic Standard Time, standardized time system utilized by inhabitants of Citadel Council Space

Ionúin Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Próidh - aggressive omnivorous mammal resembling a wolverine, but weighing in at 70+ kg when full-grown. This extremely dangerous nocturnal hunter frequently takes prey many times larger than itself. As with all Thessian life, employs eezo to generate a biotic effect; utilizes a form of biotic charge to tackle and overcome prey (also Irish for bear)

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 6 Jul 2188

Liara's eyes were reluctant to open after the tiring, restless night. However correct Derek may have been about her being disturbed every few hours, Liara immediately knew it was worth any discomfort she may have endured through the night when her gaze was met by brilliant, pain-free green orbs as Shepard leaned over her. "Good morning, Blue."

"Siame," she whispered. "You look like you feel much better."

"I do, Li... with many thanks due to you, I'm sure." Shepard reached over to caress the Asari's cheek lovingly. "You must have bolstered me all night; you look exhausted."

"Off and on, yes, but worth every bit of effort to see you better this morning." Liara's eyes closed and she leaned into Shepard's touch. "I love you, Samantha, and it soothes my heart to know you are going to be alright after such an ordeal."

"Largely because of you, Love. Didn't you once say something about not wanting to be the fair maiden that needed rescue?" Shepard smiled and chuckled quietly, "I think you're there."

Liara's eyes popped back open and she gave her lover a playful swat. "I simply meant I wanted to be self sufficient... to be an equal partner. I did not intend for us to swap places!"

They were still lying in the bed chatting and giggling when Alyna walked in, a huge smile immediately appearing on her face at the carefree exchanges. "So. It seems our patient is doing better this morning. That's excellent!"

"Yes, it is." Liara sat up and slid off the bed. "Let me get out of your way." She turned back and placed a quick peck on Shepard's lips before whispering, "Be good... and don't give me that look; you know exactly what I'm talking about, Samantha."
"Only if you promise me that you'll get a shower and take a nap; you're wiped, Li." Shepard glanced at their physician as she continued, "Hopefully, I'll be able to join you."

"Don't be counting on it, Captain." Alyna offered an apologetic smile. "I have to run a couple of additional tests to see where your mineral and electrolyte levels are, as well as your eezo. Then, I want to examine your dermal regenerations and see how they're doing... and probably work on that neck burn a bit more. It still looks rather irritated this morning."

"If I haven't heard from you, I'll definitely bring you some lunch and we'll at least eat together." Liara grimaced as she continued, "But, before I do anything else, I have to place a couple of calls... first to Armali to give them an update, then to Garrus. Riana sent out a Brokerage update, and I don't want Garrus showing up on our doorstep when he hears about this through Turian Intelligence channels. To prevent that, I need to contact him before the news starts showing up in message traffic on Palaven."

"Probably a good idea... because it's very likely he'd be on the next shuttle headed this way." The lightheartedness in Shepard's attitude had evaporated with Liara's words, as they made her think of the news that had been delivered to the last surviving Tressi sibling. "As for Armali, the staff must be beside themselves, to have such a thing happen on their watch. We need to make plans to visit the townhouse as soon as I'm allowed to travel... so we can speak to Alestia."

Sympathizing with Shepard's motivation, Alyna sighed sadly. "You can travel as soon as I release you today, Captain. Though your trip may need to be supervised by Derek, who will accompany you the entire time you are gone in order to continue monitoring your recovery." She wagged a blue finger in Shepard's face at the protest she saw forming on the Spectre's lips. "There will be no ifs, ands, or buts, Captain. You will have a medical escort whenever you leave the premises... until all your tests come back normal and you are cleared for duty. Understood?"

Liara covered her mouth with her hand in an attempt to hide the smirk forming on her lips, but it did no good as Shepard looked back and forth between the two, a look of incredulity on her face. "You too, T'Soni? You know how fast I heal and that I won't need an escort, but I see I have no say in the matter, seeing as you are all conspiring against me!"

"Liara had nothing to do with this, I assure you... but I must admit your statement is more accurate than you realize, Shepard." Alyna had a gentle smile on her face as she confessed, "I was late this morning because I took time to have a long, and rather informative, discussion with Doctor Karin Chakwas before heading in your direction." As Shepard flopped back onto the bed with a disgusted roll of her eyes, Alyna laughed. "I will say she had some very interesting advice for me regarding your... and Liara's... care."

Shepard glanced at her Promised and groaned, "We're doomed, T'Soni. We'll never have any fun anymore!"

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**Trebia System, Apien Crest, At Large**

After a productive few days on the new CGC, Garrus Vakarian had actually managed to fall asleep during the FTL transit between the Widow System and the Apien Crest; he awakened for several minutes when the ship dropped from FTL in a swirl of blue-shifted emissions. Glancing up at the dual chronometers on the bulkhead beside the hatch – one showing GST, the other displaying time-to-destination – he sighed tiredly as he shifted his body around in an attempt to work the kinks out of his lower back.
Thinking, *Too many bullets with depleted shields*, he finally found a position that eased the ache under his carapace, closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep as the corvette made the jump to FTL again, this time to begin the six-to-seven hour trip from the relay to Palaven, currently on the far side of the sun. As he slept, he began to dream of the final days and hours of the Reaper war; a confused kaleidoscope of shapes, sounds and colors gradually coalesced into the rubble strewn landscape of his own homeworld. It wasn't long before he found himself on Menae, the moon overrun with Reaper Spawn.

Eventually, this somehow morphed into the shattered cityscape of the Human metropolis of London; Reapers were raking the flattened area around the brilliant beam of light between the ground and the Citadel with their prime weapons, the blindingly brilliant red flashes of pure energy in sharp contrast to the blackness beyond. As he watched in horrified fascination, one of the destructive beams touched down and traveled straight towards Shepard; he wanted to help, but his feet seemed to be mired in a sticky ooze and he knew he would never get to her in time. The beam got closer… closer… until Shepard suddenly vanished beneath it.

"Spirits!" Garrus exploded out of bed, landing painfully on his side on the cold deck. After a frantic few moments of looking blindly around in the darkened compartment, he came to his senses, thinking, *Damn it to Hell! Just a nightmare… Where in Hell did that come from?* Rising sluggishly to his feet, he activated the belt-rail lighting before slowly stepping over to the nearby basin, where he filled a cup with water and drank it straight down.

He sat on the edge of his bed and thought of all the destruction the monsters had caused before being destroyed by Commander Shepard’s activation of the Crucible, only to recognize it no longer mattered. *What's done is done… and, in the end… we crushed the bastards!* Glancing at the chronometers, he realized the ship was less than 90 minutes from landing on the homeworld; thinking, *I can't wait to see Desis again*, he stood and began getting ready to leave the ship.

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**Cipritine, Palaven, Apien Crest**

Desis Vyessan was waiting as the small corvette noisily eased into its assigned landing space in the recently rebuilt military docks near the outskirts of Cipritine. She had arrived early, not wanting to waste one precious second of the time he would be home by being late to greet him; additionally, she had some very good news she needed to share with him.

Once the small vessel was locked in its cradle, the outer hatch for the main airlock swung open to allow crew and passengers to disembark; after several of the crew had exited, Garrus walked through the hatchway, carrying his gear bags and gazing about… obviously looking for someone. Catching sight of an anxiously waiting Desis, he flared his mandibles in happiness as he began purposely walking towards her.

Deciding to meet him halfway, Desis broke into a trot; his attempt at a dignified greeting was abruptly cut off as she launched herself at him from a meter away, forcing him to drop his gear bags in order to catch her as she applied a full-body hug to the love of her life. "Spirits, Dee!" He laughed in joy at her display of affection, saying, "I know you miss me when I'm off-world, but it's only been a few days. What would you do if I had to be gone for several weeks, or several months?"

She pulled her head back enough to nuzzle his nose plates before replying, her sub-harmonics indicative of the seriousness of her statement. "Don't, Garrus… don't even think to joke about being away that long." She unwound her legs from the backs of his thighs, cautious to not hook him with her spurs. With her weight once again on her own feet, she continued, "I don't want to become one
of those females that completely falls apart when their mates are away, but you need to know how terribly much I miss you when you're off-world." She reached up to gently grab his mandibles as she said, "Ancestors only know how much I love you, Garrus Vakarian."

She nuzzled his neck as he tightened his arms around her in loving reassurance. "It brings me no joy to be away from you Dee… you must know that by now. And there will come a time when I'll be home with you every night… probably so underfoot you'll be glad for a break." He had hoped to lighten her mood with his last statement, but realized he'd misjudged her when her eyes narrowed slightly and her mandibles clamped solidly to her lower jaw.

"Perhaps. You still haven't told me you love me, Garrus. A girl might be feeling a bit insecure right about now."

"Spirits! I love you to infinity, Desis."

"That's great to hear… and I love you more!" She grabbed one of his travel packs as he picked up the other; hooking a hand under his arm, she said, "Come on. Speeder's this way… We need to get home."

Garrus allowed his lover to steer him to the area reserved for VIP shuttles and speeders; after walking past several personnel transports, she stepped in between a pair of X3M's. Setting his travel bag on the metal decking as she unhooked her arm from Vakarian's elbow, Desis activated her omnitool and initiated the 'open' sequence for the vehicle's canopy and side doors, then deftly grabbed and loaded both the travel bags in the rear section as Garrus folded himself into the right front seat.

Desis entered from the left and quickly closed the side doors and canopy as she initialized the machine's compact eezo core. Bringing the speeder straight up nine meters, she deftly spun it around 180º, slaved the navigational computer to Cipritine's master traffic control system, then sat back as the system added her vehicle into the traffic grid. When the speeder accelerated away from its parking area and turned onto what Desis recognized as a pre-programmed course, she remarked as she glanced at Garrus, "Things are moving so much better since the SILC restored the traffic control computers."

Garrus had been staring out the side, marveling at all the newly repaired infrastructure. Turning his head to look at Desis, he replied, "I'm still having a hard time believing…" he waved a hand in the general direction of the ground below and ahead, "… the pace of reconstruction. Simply incredible. I can actually see a difference after only a few days away."

He returned his gaze forward as he settled back in the comfortable seat; in a matter of moments, he had drifted off to sleep, awakening only when the slight jolt of the speeder's contact with the pavement outside their quarters intruded on his short nap. Blinking his eyes open, he chuckled softly at the look of concern in the silver-flecked violet eyes regarding him. "Ride's so smooth, it put me right to sleep," he mumbled.

With a mocking tilt of her head clearly expressing doubt, she murmured, "Uh huh," before asking, "You look tired, Garrus… more so than you should be for such a short trip. You feeling okay? Anything I should be concerned about?"

"Let's go inside, Dee," came the reply. "I can explain, maybe after a few sips of brandy."

In a slightly skeptical tone of voice, sub-harmonics expressing suspicion, she responded, "You're not keeping… things… problems, from me, are you Garrus?"

Mandibles flared wide and downward in discomfiture, he responded quickly. "Spirits, Dee! I would

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Garrus sighed in contentment as Desis handed him a glass of fine Turian brandy before sensuously sliding her lissome body into his lap; wrapping her arms loosely around his shoulders, she touched her nose plates to his for a moment, then drew back to gaze into his eyes as she said, "Okay, big guy… talk to me. Why are you so tired?"

Garrus used one hand to caress the backs of her thighs as he sipped from the glass. Offering the glass to her, he watched as she allowed him to tip the glass up to her mouth. After swallowing a bit of the potent liquid, she waited as he took another sip before setting the glass down on the side table. "I believe the time change between here and the CGC has disturbed my normal sleep pattern; GST and Cipritine local time are currently twelve hours apart, and my time asleep on the way here from the relay was interrupted by a bad dream."

Desis gently stroked his mandibles as he fell silent. "I believe I can guarantee you'll sleep soundly tonight, my love, because you'll be wrapped in my loving embrace instead of sleeping alone."

Garrus flared his mandibles in happiness. "That sounds delightful, Dee. Maybe I should insist on you accompanying me on my trips to the CGC."

She gently stroked his crest, saying, "Now you're being silly… my job doesn't require me to travel off world… at least not as often as yours does." She picked up the glass on the side table and drained the last bit of brandy before continuing. "However, I did receive a really special communication yesterday that will require us to travel off world together." Her eyes were gleaming in delight as she continued, "We've been invited as VIP's to a ceremony, Garrus… a very special ceremony. I've already responded for both of us, so you need to begin planning for an absence of several days on either side of August 15th."

He looked at her in puzzlement for just a moment before realization set in. "We're going to Thessia?" Before she could respond, he laughed in joy as he answered his own question. "We're going to see Shepard and T'Soni get chained!"

"Bonded," corrected Desis. "It's a bonding ceremony, Garrus, and from the language contained in the message, I believe an invitation to such is a rather singular honor… one seldom offered to non-Asari when it involves a high house."

"Sounds like just what we need, Dee," came the enthusiastic reply. "A short vacation… long enough to visit our friends, but not so long that our jobs overwhelm us when we return!" He hugged her a bit tighter. "This is going to really be fun. I'll finally get to see T'Soni's home and meet all of the commandos and house staff, and I can find out from Shepard how well Daxa Rusim and Tonan Jorrill are fitting into the crew of her new Spectre ship."

Desis chuckled lightly before responding. "That would be the *Knight Shade*, Garrus, and don't forget… we'll have an opportunity to visit with Samantha Traynor and Riana Iregos as well. Spirits! We'll be able to meet the *Knight Shade*’s entire crew, and visit with crew from the Normandy."

Garrus mouth fell and he spread his mandibles wide in an expression of pure joy. "You think Williams will bring the Normandy to Thessia?" Shaking his head slightly in mock disbelief, he wrapped his arms around the love of his life and squeezed gently. "How is it that I have been so blessed to meet and fall in love with the smartest, most beautiful female in the Hierarchy?"
"I don't know about the 'fall in love' part of that statement, Garrus." The snarky response was accompanied by a soft caress across his fringe as her sub-harmonics took on a beguiling lilt with a whispered, "But you really do owe a debt of gratitude to Spectre Shepard for formally introducing us… Otherwise, I wouldn't be draped across your legs, allowing you to massage the back of my thighs while feeling longing… and lust, for you in equal measure."

Garrus chortled. "I expect I owe Shepard much more than a simple thanks for introducing us. Desis. As for your immediate desires, I don't believe I am so tired I cannot attempt to alleviate those feelings." With a serious note in his flanging voice, he added, "I love you, Desis."

"Speaking of our favorite couple..." Their plans for the night were interrupted by the trill of the comm system – the identification system listing the incoming communication as a priority call from the T'Soni Estate. Dee's voice reflected concern as she asked, "Did Liara or Shepard know you were returning today?"

Garrus' mandible's flexed in deliberation. "Not that I know of... then again, I'm not even sure they knew I was gone. They're likely calling to confirm receipt of the invite."

Any hope the call was something so simple vanished immediately as Dee opened the connection, revealing an extremely tired and haggard looking Liara on the viewscreen. Garrus sat forward so abruptly he almost dumped Dee from his lap. "Spirits, T'Soni! You look like death warmed over! What's happened... and where the Hell is Shepard?"

"I'll admit it was a long night, but not for the reason you think." Liara took a deep breath and briefly relayed what had happened. "I boosted her for a short period every time the medical staff woke us last night – which was much more frequently than I'd anticipated – so yes, I am tired. But, as a result, Shepard is doing remarkably well and is simply going through some follow-up testing this morning before they'll release her."

"And then you're headed to Armali. Damn, that's tough. Give Alestia our best and tell them if there's anything we can do... Well, you know." He paused and flared his mandibles. "Speaking of which... Is there anything you need, Liara? You know if it's within my power..." He left the remainder of the statement hanging, confident the Asari knew what he meant.

"Thank you, Garrus; you're a true friend." Liara stifled a yawn and continued, "Just show up for our bonding and be here for us. Your presence is the best gift you could give right now."

Garrus offered up a quick nod. "Count on it, T'Soni... and tell Shepard we said hello."

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**T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia**

"We're on our way, Liara." Aethyta turned to the side and Liara could hear someone speaking in the background, though the words were unintelligible, before her father turned back toward the screen. "Moz wants to know if Alestia can come. She's eager to talk to Shepard... to make sure the Captain doesn't feel guilty for Molly's death. She told us... well, never mind what she told us, because she wants to tell you herself. We'll simply bring Team 2 and give Teana's team a break."

"She'd be welcome, Dad, along with Mozia and anyone else who wants to come and lighten Shepard's burden. Samantha feels horrible about what happened." Feeling exhaustion seeping through her bones, Liara's eyes closed and she subconsciously scrubbed her fingertips across her forehead. "Everyone feels horrible about what happened, so any words of encouragement would certainly help."
"Of course she feels horrible about it! We all do... but that doesn't mean we blame her for some lunatic's vengeance killing!" Aethyta frowned. "And what about you, Little Wing? You look pale... like you're ready to fall over. You need to get some rest as well."

Once more looking at her father, a warm comfort spread though Liara at the idea that she had rediscovered a parent whom she had thought was long lost; a father who honestly cared, no matter what Liara had always feared while growing up. The younger Asari smiled softly, "That's where I'm headed next, Dad; I just needed to talk to you first and pass along the good news. Now, I plan on taking a warm, relaxing shower followed by a nice long nap... only getting up again in time to have lunch with Samantha."

"In that case, we'll delay our departure to make sure we don't arrive until after lunch. That way, you get your rest and can enjoy your time with Shepard without having to worry about us showing up while you're trying to eat." Aethyta's hand had started reaching for the disconnect, but she paused. "Oh, one more thing. Mozia says no sessions tomorrow. We'll resume on Wednesday and give you kids a couple of extra days to recover. Those sessions are too taxing for you right now and we have a month of spare time built in at the end just for that purpose."

Aethyta noticed Liara's eyes brighten just a bit at the news and knew she had eliminated an unvoiced concern. "So, off you go and we'll see you sometime this afternoon."

"Thanks, Dad." Liara blushed slightly and her face held a tired smile. "And Dad? I love you."

As the screen for the communications system faded to black, Aethyta stood stock-still and stared at the blank screen for an exceptionally long moment before saying, "Well I'll be damned. I love you too, Liara."

Mozia stepped up and wrapped her arms around her lover from behind, whispering softly in her ear. "Next time, Thyta, make sure you say it before the call terminates."

As Mozia and Aethyta strode through the front door of the estate, they were met by Lyessa. "Matriarchs. Welcome back. Liara informed me of your pending arrival, but I'm afraid our mistress has not yet risen from her slumber."

Upon hearing the news, Aethyta's expression clouded with concern. "She looked pretty haggard on the vid call... She didn't lie to us about Shepard's or her own condition, did she?"

Feeling almost scandalized by the suggestion, Lyessa answered defensively, "Absolutely not, Matriarch! Liara is painfully honest at times, even when it is a detriment to her or our house!"

Lyessa was prepared to go on but Aethyta held up a hand and apologized, "You're right... It was a stupid thing to say, but you know me. I spoke out of concern without thinking; I'm sorry."

Harrumphing, the steward accepted the apology at face value. "Shall I wake her and let her know you are here?"

"Don't worry about it, I'll go up." Aethyta smiled softy, her face holding a rare expression which not even Mozia had seen very often. "I missed a lot of years where I should have had the joy of waking my little one. Maybe, in our own way, Liara and I can get some of that time back now."

Aethyta slipped eagerly upstairs only to pause at the doorway to the main suite in unexpected trepidation. Firming her resolve, she tapped lightly on the door; when she got no response, she opened the door and slipped quietly into the room. Moving silently to the bedside, she looked down
pensively upon her sleeping progeny, scarcely over a hundred years of age. *She's a good looking kid, Aethyta. Nezzie did good... but you were a fucking coward. What took you so damned long to introduce yourself?* She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly as she sank down onto the edge of the bed at her daughter's side. *No time like the present to start making up for all that lost time.*

Laying a hand softly on Liara's shoulder, she gave the young Asari a gentle shake. "Hey, Little Wing. Time to rise and shine, Babe."

Liara's eyes popped open at the unexpected voice and she rolled away to lie flat on the bed. "Dad. You came early? I thought you weren't coming until after lunch?"

Aethyta chuckled and said with a smile, "It's almost two, Liara."

Liara sat up abruptly, "Goddess! I must have slept through my alarm!"

"Hold onto your crests, there, sleepyhead." Aethyta stroked her daughter's arm softly. "Shepard is sound asleep as well, so has no idea you missed your lunch date... and apparently you both needed the rest, so it's not a bad thing.” Her expression sobered and she took Liara's chin gently in her fingertips, scrutinizing the young Asari's face. "Because even though you look a Hell of a lot better than you did on this morning's vid call, you still look positively wrung out."

Liara started to respond but Aethyta's grip shifted quickly to a finger placed gently on her daughter's lips. "Hush. There's time for us to have that conversation later, when both you and Shepard have recovered your strength. For now, I'll head back downstairs and visit. You take your time and join us when you're ready. There is no rush... We're here all night, kiddo."

Caught off guard for the second time on the same day, Aethyta could do nothing but wrap her arms around the daughter she suddenly found pressed against her for a hug. "Thanks for coming, Dad."

Releasing the befuddled matriarch, Liara continued, "I'll be down soon, I promise."

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After a brief conversation regarding what had happened in Shyria, Liara was the first of the small group to enter the medical facility, waking the captain with a soft kiss on her cheek. "Good afternoon, Siame. My father and Mozia have arrived."

Shepard's expression registered confusion as she turned her head to meet Liara's lips. "Afternoon? What happened to lunch?"

Aethyta chuckled. "Doesn't miss a beat, that one. Hello to you, too, Shepard."

Having been distracted by Liara's kiss and her statement referencing the time of day, Shepard didn't hear anything else Liara had said. "Oh, hey.” Realizing she had guests, Shepard's confusion shifted to a welcoming smile as she toggled the bed control so she could sit up and face her visitors. "Aethyta. Mozia. Good to see you both."

Mozia approached and gently gripped the woman's shoulder. "You look much better than I expected from the tale, Captain. That is welcome relief indeed."

"As you know, I normally heal rather quickly," Shepard answered swiftly as she reached out and gripped Liara's hand. "But this one here helped me a lot last night.” She gave her Promised a somewhat chastising glance as she added, "Somewhat to her own detriment, I do believe."

"I agree... considering how she looked this morning when we talked.” Aethyta gave her daughter a telling glance before continuing, "But, she took a nap that was much longer than anticipated... which
helped her rebound a bit more than I expected."

Shepard looked around the room and questioned, "Where's Alyna? I'd like to get out of this bed, get dressed and grab some lunch." She glanced at the matriarchs, continuing, "Have you eaten?"

Dropping her hand from Shepard's shoulder, Mozia answered, "Yes, we have. We delayed our arrival so you would have a chance to eat lunch before we got here but, unintentional or not, Liara took the more prudent path and slept in. I believe the additional rest worked out better for the both of you."

"We're spending the night, so we can leave you alone to eat..." Aethyta got no farther before Shepard interrupted her.

"Absolutely not. We can eat and talk at the same time... unless you want to do something else now that you've seen Liara and me alive and well?"

Aethyta shrugged, "Just thought we'd give you some privacy to talk to Alyna... perhaps get dressed..." She finished with a smirk, "...unless you plan on coming to the dining room in your hospital gown."

Shepard's face took on a hint of pink as she responded, "I suppose there is that."

Mozia wrapped a hand around her lover's bicep and gave a tug. "Come along, Thyta; you've teased Shepard enough. Let us go speak with the team captains; there is some unpleasant business ahead."

Shepard frowned. "Are you planning to discuss the replacement for Molia?"

Mozia turned and met her eyes. "Captain Shepard. We would do no such thing until the both of you are ready to join that discussion, especially since it is an Estate position. Even as Regent, I would never presume to know your preference much less even start such a discussion without you." She glanced at Aethyta and back before she continued, "We simply want to pass on our condolences, see how everyone is dealing with the loss, and begin planning the vigil."

Chastised, Shepard lowered her eyes. "Of course. My apologies, Matriarch."

Mozia dropped Aethyta's arm and returned to the bedside, placing warm fingers under Shepard's chin and gently raising her head. "There was no offense taken, Captain, so no apology is necessary. You have much to learn yet about how the Asari conduct business." Her eyes twinkled and the corners of her mouth turned up with a hint of a smile as she continued, "Besides... if I had such a thin skin, I never would have been chosen as Regent... as I never would have survived even a single session within that pack of próidh who call themselves the Defense Committee."

With that, Shepard chuckled lightly and reached up to take Mozia's hand. "Thank you for that... because we certainly would have been lost without you." Her smile faded with the name that blasted through the link. Molia.

With a reassuring smile for her Promised, Shepard turned back to the matriarch and continued her previous train of thought, "Me particularly, without the benefit of having Liara at my side... and on the hunt after I disappeared over Alchera. If she had to remain here to run House T'Soni... without her, I would have quite literally been lost."

"Well it didn't happen that way, so quit talking about it," Aethyta growled. "Everyone here today survived the damned war, we're here now and we're supposed to be preparing for a bonding... not mulling over sad what-could-have-beens that aren't worth the mental anguish!" The scowl that had suddenly emerged on her face disappeared as quickly as it arrived. "Now. We're leaving to locate
Alyna... so you can get your ass out of that bed and come join the conversations about the future instead of the past. Got it?"

Her heart lightening with the matriarch's protective streak coming through, Shepard smiled and completed the best matriarchal salute she could while sitting in a hospital bed. Aethyta simply scoffed, the sound coming from her throat sounding as if she was about to spit before ending in her parting words, "Goddess be damned, Shepard. You know I hate that shit."

After the matriarchs turned and left the room, Liara gave her a disapproving glance. "You know she dislikes such formality. Why do you purposely aggravate her like that?"

Laughing, Shepard grinned and replied, "I'm not aggravating her. It's like her comments about our sex life... I'm just teasing and answering irreverently in kind... and she knows it. And even though she won't admit it, she loves it... and might even be starting to like me."

Liara closed her eyes and shook her head. "Goddess, what have I done? You're just like her!"

Alyna entered the room as a robust laugh erupted from the Spectre and she immediately noted the strength of Shepard's voice and the improved color in Liara's face. "I hear you are ready to get out of here, Captain."

In answer, Shepard turned on the bed and dropped her feet over the side. "Absolutely. I'm feeling good... and my stomach is going to find its own way to the dining room if I don't escort it there in short order."

The doctor had activated her omnitool as she approached the bed, so began scanning as soon as she was at Shepard's side. After a moment of silence, she turned the device off and dropped her arm. With a relaxed smile, she stated, "Everything looks good, Captain. I want to check you again in twenty-four hours, but you are now cleared for light duty. No Armax participation in tomorrow morning's sessions, but you can go... as an observer only... without medical escort. I'll check you when you return and reevaluate your status at that time." Her smile was temporarily swallowed by earnest concern as she finished, "If you follow my instructions, I see no reason why I shouldn't be able to release you to full duty at that time. Understood?"

Even though dressed in only a hospital gown, professionalism and respect for the doctor before her took ahold of Shepard as she slid from the bed to stand on her own two feet for the first time in over a day. She dipped her head briefly in respect before once more meeting Alyna's eyes as she spoke. "Perfectly, Doctor T'Lori." Liara circled around the bed to stand at Shepard's side, slipping an arm around the woman's waist as the Spectre continued, "I appreciate everything you and Doctor Yandle did for me."

Shepard glanced quickly at her Ionaín Álainn and returned the gesture, pulling Liara close. "I plan on being around to see our children born... and Liara and I are beginning to discuss our long-term future more seriously, so I'm done being reckless." Her chest filled with the warmth of loving devotion pouring in as she finished, "And that means, no matter how much it may inconvenience me, I will follow your instructions to the letter and keep myself fit and healthy."

Alyna smiled as she queried, "Will Doctor Chakwas believe any of this when I relay the news to her?"

Shepard chuckled briefly and then smirked as she replied, "Not one single word of it."
I realized, compliments of FF reader/reviewer Theodur, that the timeline for the last few chapters wasn’t very clear, seeing as my pace shifted significantly. In the story description, I warned of time-jumps and such, but have given you no way to know when that happens. As such, I have gone back through the first few chapters and added date references, which will be included from here on out. The first 4 chapters spanned nearly 3 weeks, from 16 Jun – 5 July 2188... and then, chapters 5 and 6 were all on the 5th, and chapter 7 started with Liara waking on the morning of 6 July 2188. Chapter 8 resumes on the afternoon of that same day... Sorry for any confusion this change of pace may have caused and, rest assured, our primary couple has not ignored the death of one of their own, Molia Tressi.

Ajrakila - identified with the aspect of Athame Rala, the warrior goddess and patron of huntresses

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

Ionúín Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

LEAP - League of Earth Alliance Patriots

Nara - literally "bearer"; one who shoulders another's burden, aids others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

SILC - Synthetic Intelligence Life Codes (previously known as Geth)

XO - Executive Officer

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 6 Jul 2188

After a late lunch, Liara called a meeting in the commando commons area for everyone who was currently present at the Estate – together with Mozia, Aethyta, and their Team 2 commandos including Alestia Tressi, as well as the entire crew of the Knight Shade. Fala Veya, the surviving Estate Team 1 commando who had been captured along with Shepard and Molia Tressi, also attended and, looking surprisingly well, spoke first. She told her story about the capture, of the sickening feeling in her stomach as she watched Captain Shepard go down... and how, by random chance, she was the one left behind in the slave cages by Lieutenant Clarissa Garia.

"Once they took Molia away, I was very pointedly informed by a rather crude Batarian that Jona Sederis was keeping me around for the singular purpose of Shepard's follow-on torture sessions... perhaps later that same day but, more likely, the next." Her focus shifted to the Spectre as she continued, "And, if Shepard proved weak and did not survive the encounter, I would no longer be of any use to Sederis." If Samantha hadn't been closely watching the commando's eyes, she would have missed the quick flash of revulsion that preceded her next sentence. "The way he leered at me made me immediately understand there was a fate far worse than death ahead of me... and it made my blood run cold."
Her eyes shifted back to Liara and the crew of the *Knight Shade*. "I know I owe not only my life but also my sanity to each and every one of you." A visible tremor ran through Fala's body as she glanced at her mistress and finished, "I shudder to think what would have happened had you not followed so quickly. I owe every one of you a debt of life."

"No, Fala... you don't." The Spectre glanced around at everyone present and, knowing she was going against deeply embedded Asari culture, she continued, "Our rescue was a team effort and that's what teams do. That's what *friends* do." Shepard hesitated and her gaze dropped to the floor for a moment before rising again to seek Liara's approval.

Liara was somewhat taken aback when it suddenly dawned on her that Shepard was seeking permission... not from her *Iónúin Álainn*, but in deference to Lady T'Soni. Liara smiled and nodded in approval, saying aloud, "Yes. Say what you are thinking, Captain."

With the group unsure of exactly what had just transpired between their leading couple, the brief silence was deafening until Shepard spoke softly, breaking the uneasy quiet. "I know you all feel deeply about this tradition... and I won't keep any of you from making such vows with persons you don't normally work with... *outside of this house*. But, within House T'Soni, we will all be working together long enough to tip those scales back and forth many times... too many to keep track of... so I want no talk of such debts." Her voice strengthened and her eyes flashed with conviction as she continued, "As captain, the ultimate responsibility for your safety... for the safety of every member of House T'Soni... is mine and mine alone." Shepard took a deep breath and blew it out as she adjusted to the weight of responsibility that settled squarely upon her shoulders with her words.

"The unfortunate truth of the matter is just how easily we were taken. It was frightening, particularly when Sederis revealed herself to me; I honestly thought I was a dead woman. This incident has demonstrated in no uncertain terms that our security procedures have to change. As both the future father to the heirs of House T'Soni and Captain of the Guard, I can't let something like this happen again. Ever. *To anyone* who belongs to this house."

"Captain..." Alestia Tressi stood slowly, realizing they had just come full circle. Shepard had once before assumed responsibility for the death of any commando under her charge, after Benezia and her personal commandos, including Daessa Tressi, had been killed on Noveria, and the Spectre had formally been named Captain of the T'Soni Guard. A somber expression on her face, Alestia started again. "Nara... You did not *let* the kidnapping happen and cannot blame yourself for what transpired... The blame for your capture and Molia's death falls squarely at the feet of Jona Sederis. *Huntress* Molia died doing what she was there to do... Whether you want to hear it or not... she died protecting you." She shook her head and held up a hand to keep Shepard from speaking. "No. That she was my sister does not change how I feel about this issue."

After briefly looking about herself at the assembled commandos, Alestia continued, "Each of us chose to take the vows of service to House T'Soni. All of us acknowledge and freely accept the risks that come along with those vows or we would not be here. There are many who have left House T'Soni for just that reason but, obviously, neither I nor my sisters fall into that category."

Fala rose to stand at Alestia's side. "I agree... and it is not any different than your conviction to your military service. Had it been necessary, I would have willingly forfeited my life to protect yours, Captain." As Shepard once more went to protest, Fala's objection was more forceful than Alestia's. "No, Captain! That is the primary function of the T'Soni Guard... and, with the evils that still exist in our galaxy, our purpose does not have the luxury of becoming merely ceremonial! Each of us recognizes the hazards and we accept the risks that come with being part of a great house. I will not allow you or your mistaken feelings of guilt to lessen the sacrifices of those we have lost for what we consider a noble cause."
Aethyta's voice rang out, hard and sure. "Agreed... but what Shepard says is also true; our procedures failed us yesterday, resulting in three of our own being taken." She paused and drew a deep breath, standing as she finished, "I honestly believe getting two of the three back was a gift from the Goddess; if Sederis had simply wanted Shepard dead, we would all be in mourning instead of preparing to celebrate a bonding. Next time, we may not be so lucky... so we have to make sure there is no next time."

The Armali Team 2 Lead, Aressa T'Saptos, had risen to stand with Aethyta. "Since the end of the Reaper War, we have relaxed too much. We have become slack and inattentive; it is time to wake up... as it has become dreadfully apparent that threats to our primaries, Lady Liara and Captain Shepard, still exist... in unknown and surprisingly multiple forms; first LEAP and now Sederis. Who knows what other darkness hides within the shadows?" Her voice had gradually picked up strength and increased in volume as she spoke. Now, she raised a fist in the air, glowing slightly of biotics as she shouted out, "We must be ready whenever and in whatever form they may come!"

Sitting on the couch with Liara's steadfast presence at her side, Shepard was overwhelmed at the sudden response to Aressa's words. Every single one of the commandos jumped to their feet and threw a fist into the air, each shouting a favorite battle cry. A single tear trickled down Liara's left cheek as she and Shepard stood with the rest of them. As the shouts died down, Liara squeezed the Spectre's hand and spoke earnestly. "Your passion is noteworthy, but as the new leaders of House T'Soni, we have not yet done anything to earn such devotion..."

She was interrupted by a rather animated objection from Livos Tanni. "Goddess, Liara! You, along with Shepard, rallied the people of the Milky Way to defeat an eons-old synthetic intelligence bent on their next cycle of galactic destruction! If saving all of us by breaking that sequence of death is not enough to warrant our devotion, I don't know what in the blue blazes would be!"

Liara and Shepard both blushed as the field of commandos before them began to laugh – from a combination of the maiden's naivety and the simple reminder that they were all lucky to be alive. Mozia stepped up and gently took their hands. "You are Liara T'Soni, head of House T'Soni, and Samantha Shepard, Spectre and Captain of the T'Soni Guard. While we need no more than that to explain why we do what we do, you are also... simply... good people. Honest, loving, devoted, sincere... and you possess the integrity and vision to make this House even greater. We all recognize it... and I am sure that deep in your hearts, you know it as well."

Shepard closed her eyes and took a deep breath before looking out across the crowd. "You all give us entirely too much credit, for we are but two... two people who would have been completely unable to accomplish what we did without your help. Those accolades belong to all of us... but I can understand your intentions, so thank you."

The Estate Guard Captain, Lyria Tremi, stepped forward from the group. "I agree we need to plan a council of all the captains and team leads to decide our way forward... at some point in the very near future... but, tonight we begin the celebration of Molia's life... as well as the safe return of both Fala and Captain Shepard! There is time enough later for business."

They all spent the evening together in the commando commons in remembrance of Molia's life, swapping memories of the events that had comprised her life, combined with the bonds of love and friendship which told the more complete story of a commando who had been with the T'Soni family for more than two hundred years. As evening turned to night, the commandos worked together to prepare Molia's body for burial. The doctors had labored to close the wounds and repair the commando's appearance as best they could, but the trauma Molia had gone through remained evident in spite of all their effort; everyone was relieved when the cleansing was finished and her broken body was mostly covered by the funereal robes.
As the calendar rolled to the next day, their vigil started immediately after midnight and, as a group, the commandos began the Song of the Journey, also known as the mourning chant, to protect the soul of the deceased from the darkness. When the sun finally started to creep above the horizon, everyone but Alestia fell silent, leaving it to her to complete the final verse on her own, invoking the three aspects of Athame she most closely associated with her deceased sister. Her voice choked with grief, Alestia completed the chant, invoking Tylani, for Molia's good humor and endless forgiveness, Artarva for her love of debate and the sharing of ideas, and Rala, the warrior aspect who was always invoked for huntresses.

The commandos sat in reverent silence until the sun was fully revealed above the horizon; then, the Priestess of Athame began to speak. "It is now, upon the winds of the dawn's light, that the soul of Huntress Molia Tressi, loyal comrade and sister-in-arms of House T'Soni, may begin her journey across the seas to join with the Goddess." She looked to Alestia as she continued, "It is time to offer your sister to the Goddess Athame. Have you selected your bearers?"

"I have." Her voice trembling, Alestia turned to the leader of Molia's commando team, Lieutenant Cyenia Axeuss. "As is our tradition, the majority of the bearers will be from my sister's squad from the Estate." Her voice broke as she continued, "Without Molly, there are five remaining; I will be the sixth and take the lead position on the right. Her captain, Lyria Tremi, will serve as the detail commander."

As soon as they were identified, the commandos moved immediately to their respective positions and stood at ease, awaiting the priestess, who would lead the procession, along with Lady Liara, to the awaiting ship. With a reassuring squeeze of her hand from Shepard, Liara walked forward and took her place. As soon as Liara and the priestess stopped side-by-side, Lyria softly commanded, "Ready, lift." Each member called upon their biotics and the bier holding Molia's body lifted smoothly from the ground. Again, Lyria spoke. "Ready, step."

The procession slowly made its way to the dock, where Liara stepped aside, tears streaming silently down her face as she offered a final salute to loyal Huntress Molia Tressi. The bier passed her by and the commandos placed it upon the funeral barge, the priestess leading the way and halting just past the point where the team turned and placed the bier onto its stand. Along with the entirety of T'Soni House gathering at her back, Liara stood on the end of the pier and watched the barge travel purposefully away from its berth as Shepard moved to her side and slipped a warm hand into hers, squeezing it gently in support.

As the barge pulled away, the priestess prayed quietly over the deceased, time passing slowly as the barge made sluggish headway against the stiff morning breeze. As they approached the apogee of the long oval route from the pier, the priestess paused in her communal prayers, gathering the full attention of all those aboard when she cleared her throat and began her prayer in earnest. "May Molia's soul find blissful rest and be filled with the everlasting peace of Athame as her body returns to the sea to restart the cycle of life. May the spirit of Athame Ajrakila, the patron of huntresses, travel across the waves to take her soul under her protection. We ask Ajrakila to take her across a calm sea and a blissful ocean, to fill her everlasting soul with joy as our sister finds her way to the light of the white sun."

With a final nod from the priestess, indicating it was time for her final farewell, Alestia's hand fell to the actuator level and pushed it down. As the bier slowly tipped up and Molia's body began its slide from the barge to disappear beneath the waves, unchecked tears streamed from her face as Alestia
choked out, "Find your comfort in the embrace of the Goddess, my dear Molly. You will be missed here."

Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large – 8 Jul 2188

The Normandy had been loitering in the Far Rim since assigned the Quarian mission by the Council... and had turned up virtually nothing. Once Ashley had received the communiqué from Shepard, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt she had wasted her time monitoring the relay at Dholen. With Len'Dazza's data confirming Admirals Daro'Xen vas Moreh's and Han'Gerrel vas Neema's plans to take some kind of action to re-shackle the 'Geth,' it made perfect sense the rogue Quarians would wish to hide within monitoring distance of the SILC home system, The Sea of Storms. Knowing now that both the Neema and Moreh – along with the several dozen or so ships that had joined them – were all within the Chomos System, Commander, and Council Spectre, Ashley Williams was preparing the Normandy to conduct a critical stealth reconnaissance mission in The Phoenix Massing.

They had completed the relay jump from Dholen to Tassrah and the Normandy was now in stealth mode, traveling at FTL through the Tassrah System, on its way to the Sea of Storms. After a brief stopover at Haratar Station – referred to as Heretic Station by Legion prior to the Reaper War – their mission would finally begin in earnest.

Ashley was sitting at the desk in her office loft on deck one and planning her next move when the entry request chime at the hatch intruded on her thoughts. With a heavy sigh, she keyed in the unlocking sequence as she said, "Enter." Turning in her seat to greet whoever had come up to see her, she smiled in recognition as she stood to greet her visitors. "Engineer Daniels. Dr Chakwas. What brings you two up here this morning?"

Ash could see Gabby was worried about... something. Question is... What the Hell requires the presence of Karin Chakwas? With the slightest bit of a worried frown in her expression, she added, "Are you not feeling well, Ms Daniels?"

Gabby glanced fleetingly up at Ashley before turning to look at the doctor. Karin cleared her throat before replying softly, "Ms Daniels is... pregnant, Commander. It's actually my fault... I'm afraid I wasn't as diligent at monitoring her contraceptive implant as I should have been; as a result, this young lady has quite successfully conceived a child with Kenneth Donnelly."

Ashley's dark eyes flashed in surprise; she knew that shipboard romances occasionally ended with pregnancies – she just never imagined it happening on the Normandy. Pinching her temples between thumb and fingers, she asked, "I assume this is a welcome development and you plan on keeping the child, Ms Daniels?"

Gabby actually blushed, a phenomenon Ashley had rarely, if ever, witnessed; of more surprise, it was apparent Gabby had lost the ability to speak coherently. "We... that is, ah... Ken and I were celebrating solstice and... oh, damn." She covered her face with both hands as tears began running down her cheeks, the slight shaking of her shoulders betraying the fragility of her emotional control.

Karin wrapped an arm around the sobbing woman's back and arms while looking at Ashley. "They had no intention of getting pregnant at this time, but I have spoken with Gabby and Ken and they do want to keep the baby."

Ashley was completely flabbergasted. "So, what happens now, Ms Daniels? You do realize I cannot be responsible for a pregnant woman on the Normandy, especially with the possibility we'll
be involved in hostile action against the Quarian rebels. I'm going to have to transfer you off to a shore station." Touching the activation tab in her ear-mounted comm unit, she said, "Engineer Donnelly, please report to the captain's office."

Karin hadn't had much experience dealing with Williams as the ship's captain; as an XO, she had always been very by-the-book, so really had no expectation the Spectre would behave any differently now. In less than 90 seconds, the entry request chime sounded.

Ashley keyed the hatch open to reveal an extremely worried looking Ken Donnelly. "You wanted tae see me, Ma'am?"

"Front and center, Mister Donnelly." Ashley waited as the nervous engineer quickly moved to stand on the other side of Gabby. Even though she hadn't commanded it, Donnelly came to attention in front of her; without preliminaries, Williams inclined her head momentarily towards Gabby as she growled, "Just what the Hell were you thinking, Mister?"

She didn't expect him to answer, but he tried, in spite of the fact his brogue thickened in direct proportion to his increasing state of agitation. "Ma'am, if ye'r speaking aboot Gabby 'n' me, ah hae na excuse fur mah actions other than ah love 'er so. Ah know a've jeopardized this ship's mission... 'n' placed ye in an untenable position."

At that point, Chakwas interrupted. "Now just one minute!" Her agitated gaze moved rapidly between Donnelly and their relatively new captain and she practically growled, "I will not let this young man shoulder the blame for a malfunctioning implant! They are by no means the only people serving on this ship to indulge in sexual intercourse... they're just the most unlucky of the bunch by having a defective contraceptive implant."

Karin's challenging gaze locked squarely onto the eyes of the Normandy's captain – and the Spectre immediately understood the accusation behind the doctor's stare. Ashley was not exactly a shining example of abstaining from enjoying the physical pleasures of being with a man and, no matter how discrete she and Andreas Falk had been, the good doctor was apparently quite aware of their encounters.

In a voice brimming with barely contained impatience, Ashley met the doctor's gaze and continued, "Just so we're clear, whether it was intentional or not doesn't alter the situation, so I will repeat what I just said to Ms Daniels… for Mr Donnelly's benefit. First of all, there is no way in the galaxy I will be responsible for a pregnant woman on this ship, particularly given the possibility of upcoming hostile action against the Quarian rebels. If Ms Daniels doesn't opt for a medical discharge from the Alliance, I will transfer her off the Normandy to a shore station... no matter how the pregnancy happened or whatever the cause." She placed her fists on her hips as her focus shifted to Ken, adding, "As for you, Mr Donnelly, I still need an engineer with your knowledge of the Normandy's systems, so you will not be released to accompany Ms Daniels."

"If ye please, Ma'am... ah hae a few friends assigned tae shore facilities on Earth; any o' them would jump at a chance tae serve on this ship." Donnelly knew he was on shaky ground with Spectre Williams, but plowed ahead anyway adding, "But b'fore ye make any big changes, we'd like ye tae marry us, Ma'am!"

Gabby's jaw dropped in astonishment as she turned to stare at Kenneth; Ashley's mouth also fell open for a moment at his shocking request. Shifting her attention between the two of them, she finally zeroed in on Gabby as the embarrassed woman placed her left hand, fingers spread wide against her collarbones; Ashley instantly recognized the beautiful ring gracing the third finger of the woman's hand… Kenneth had proposed to her during the ship-wide St. Patty's Day party while the Normandy was still on its 'Victory Tour', before he became just one more victim of Matriarch
Having regained a bit of control over her emotions, Gabby offered, "Ma'am, you'll be flying the Normandy to Thessia for Captain Shepard's bonding with Liara T'Soni – that's just over a month from now. Until that time... I can still do my job, Dr Chakwas can insure I'm taking care of my health, and it would give me time to make some arrangements. If you will allow it, I'd like to stay on the ship until we hit Thessia. From there, I can catch a shuttle back to Earth or..." she raised her hands up to shoulder level before dropping them to her sides. "I'd like to stay in the Alliance, Ma'am, at least until my baby..." she paused, glanced at Donnelly and corrected herself. "...our baby... is born. Then we'll see what our options are."

"The Alliance does not forbid having children, Gabby, and there are any number of programs for new mothers and proper child care... including infants... so staying in the Alliance won't be a problem if that's what you truly wish to do." Karin gave Gabby one last squeeze to offer emotional support and smiled at the engineer before finally dropping her arm to face Ashley. Raising a brow, she addressed her captain. "Spectre Williams, if you choose to perform the ceremony... and do it soon enough... no one on board will be any the wiser concerning Gabby's little stowaway... she's physically fit and it's very early in the pregnancy, so I highly doubt she'll be showing... even when we reach Thessia. Speak with Admiral Hackett... I'll be happy to stand with you when you make the call."

Ashley hadn't been lying about needing Donnelly on the ship and it truly pained her that Gabby would have to be discharged or transferred to shore duty, but she needed time to think before she could respond to their unexpected requests. "Damn it. You two return to your posts – and not a word to anyone. I need to consider the facts and have a proposed plan in my head before I contact Admiral Hackett. After I finish my conversation with him, I'll let you know what we've come up with as our way forward."

"Pregnant!? How in Hell..."

Ashley faked a cough and quickly clamped a hand across her mouth in an attempt to keep the Admiral from witnessing the unintentional smirk at his aborted question. She glanced at Karin, and then frowned at the admiral's image in front of them. "Sir... Donnelly and Daniels intend to marry... they've been engaged since March... and, while I realize that fact doesn't excuse their behavior..."

Karin took the opportunity to interrupt, adding, "Admiral, much of the blame rests with me. I wasn't as diligent as I should have been, and failed to discover Ms Daniels' contraception implant had stopped working."

"Be that as it may, Doctor... Commander..." came the growling response. "A pregnancy on an Alliance frigate wouldn't be tolerated; as you're captain of a Spectre vessel, Ms Williams, how you choose to deal with the situation is entirely up to you." Hackett stroked his chin for a moment before continuing. "But please keep in mind that Donnelly and Daniels are still members of the Alliance Navy, so it wouldn't be out of the question for me to... request... that you facilitate their transfers off your ship as soon as possible."

The corners of Ashley's mouth turned up ever so slightly as she responded, "Understood, Sir, and I've already informed Engineer Daniels that I'll be looking for a new assignment for her. I seriously thought about booting Donnelly off the ship as well, but since the number of skilled personnel currently working in main engineering is barely adequate, even for a frigate, I really cannot afford to lose both of them. They both want to remain in the Alliance, which wouldn't be an issue if Ms Daniels was reassigned ashore. And then, to top it all off... well, Mr Donnelly asked me to marry
them, Sir, as soon as it can be arranged."

Hackett's expression changed to reflect a bit of hope that Ashley had already thought of a way to get past an unfortunate situation. "Okay, Commander… lay it out for me."

Williams glanced at Karin before squaring her shoulders and gazing straight at the old sailor’s image. "Sir, we're due to arrive at Thessia in the late afternoon of August fourteenth… for Shepard and T'Soni's bonding ceremony on the fifteenth. Ms Daniels' pregnancy will be only eight weeks along and Doctor Chakwas is positive her condition will not yet be readily apparent. As such, I propose that Engineer Daniels continues in her current position until after we depart Thessia. We have to travel through the Widow System anyway, so we can easily drop her off at the CGC, where she could easily secure transportation to the location of her new assignment."

Ashley paused, realizing that Gabby's next posting would depend on an Alliance shore facility being willing to employ an engineer needing six weeks of maternity leave in less than a year's time. "That said, Admiral, I could certainly use your help in finding a base that needs her… all I need is the name or names of who I need to contact. Mr Donnelly has informed me he knows a number of highly qualified propulsion engineers that would love to deploy on the Normandy, so the month or so lead time should be enough for me to find and evaluate her replacement."

Hackett actually smiled. "You'll have the names and base locations by the end of the day, Commander. Take a look at Donnelly's replacement candidates for Ms Daniels… I hope I'm wrong, but I doubt any are her equal when it comes to her knowledge of propulsion theory." Waving his hand, he signed off with, "Good luck, Commander Williams. We'll talk soon."

"Gabby. Ken. It would be my honor to officiate at your wedding. However…” Spectre Williams paused and drew a deep breath to ready herself for the upcoming conversation before continuing in a serious tone. "I'd be willing to bet neither of you have given any thought as to where you're gonna stay for the short duration of Gabby's remaining time on the Normandy.” Ash could feel the flush creeping up her neck as she thought about what being married would mean to young newlyweds on a ship as small as a frigate.

Ken, in fact, actually had given the matter some careful thought. "Ma'am, if ah kin? Th' lee support compartment on deck three is aye outfitted as a guest quarters… thir's a bed, a couch, a couple o' tables 'n' desk, 'n' a wardrobe. It hasn't bin used by a'body since Lieutenant Commander Falk visited yer during our stop in Rio on Earth."

Ash had memories… very fond memories… of Andreas' stay on the Normandy, but that had only been for a couple of days. Nodding at Donnelly, she replied, "Normally I'd deny your suggestion without a second thought, but…” Ash looked at Gabby as she continued, "… after your marriage is official, it will probably be the best solution for the short term.” Returning her gaze to Kenneth, she concluded, "Just don't get too comfortable in there, Mr Donnelly; your old berth will be waiting for you once we drop Gabby at the CGC."

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**Knight Shade**, **Widow Relay, at Large – 13 Jul 2188**

A week had passed since the kidnapping and the revamped House T'Soni security procedures now ensured neither Liara nor Shepard departed the Estate grounds without a full six-person commando team as escort. As such, when they emerged from the Widow Relay, Lusmeni Thoni, formerly of the Armali Strike Force and now Liara's personal pilot, used the provided contact protocols to get in
touch with the SILC ship that was supposed to be awaiting them. A robotic voice answered promptly. "SILC Freighter Rahtimaksu. Greetings. We have your cargo and are prepared for transfer. We have downloaded all other cargo and are currently in a stationary hold position near the relay; coordinates are being transmitted."

Shepard was standing on the Bridge of the Knight Shade, behind Thoni and the copilot, Daxa Rusim, so Lusmeni glanced back, asking, "That's a bit irregular, isn't it, Captain?"

"Absolutely, but so is our cargo. It's probably a good idea for us to dock inside the freighter, so we can transfer our cargo out of sight of potential prying eyes on the CGC... but give me a minute to verify." Shepard tapped a quick message into her omnitool and waited only seconds for the reply. Looking at Thoni, she grinned. "Legion says it's legit, so let's jump in the shuttle, pick up our packages and get back home."

Thoni quickly found herself flying the Knight Shade's shuttle with both Lady Liara and Spectre Shepard aboard, along with the six members of the maiden's personal guard, heading toward a rendezvous with the SILC ship. The shuttle slid easily into the nearly empty cargo bay of the freighter; peering out the forward viewscreen, Shepard and Thoni couldn't help but notice the large Prime platform standing off to the side. Shepard waited patiently as Livos popped the hatch and deployed her team; once the all safe call was given, Shepard and Liara disembarked and walked immediately to the Prime. "Legion?"

"Affirmative, Shepard Spectre."

Shepard's expression twisted in consternation. "It's still weird to think about how you can jump into any available platform... and be almost anywhere on a moment's notice."

"Understood, Shepard Spectre, but I am confident you will adapt within acceptable time parameters."

The captain laughed and clasped hands with the towering SILC. "It's good to see you, Legion; I miss having you around. If you ever get bored, my offer to join us on the Knight Shade remains open."

"We do not experience boredom, Shepard Spectre, but I will retain your offer in memory for future consideration, should such ever occur. Of more immediate concern is the safe transfer of our Quarian cargo, his personal possessions and food stuffs..." Legion paused briefly before saying something totally unexpected. "...and then get you back underway before we are detected. The Consensus has provided warning this vessel was followed out of the Ma-at system, but after multiple relay jumps and intra-system FTL travel throughout the Far Rim, Phoenix Massing, and Caleston Rift, I am confident we have evaded the Quarian rebel reconnaissance vehicle. However, this does not mean it is not actively searching and could reacquire its target, the Rahtimaksu, at any time. Time is of the essence."

As they spoke, an anti-grav lift coasted up with a number of crates, driven by a Quarian Marine who deftly vaulted from the platform to land on his feet and snap a smart salute aimed at Shepard. "Len'Dazza at your service, Spectre. I did not expect you to come here to greet me in person, Captain; I'm honored."

Shepard returned the salute and motioned toward the stack of gear Dazza had brought along. "I know I said you could bring whatever you wanted with you, but circumstances on Thessia have changed since we last spoke. We ended up coming with a six-member squad, so prioritize your cargo and we'll load what we have space for onboard. I'm pretty sure not all of that will fit... and, unfortunately, we're operating under a severe time constraint, so you don't have time to sort anything. I'm sorry."
"Can do easy, Spectre," Len shrugged. He moved immediately to the crates and pointed out two large ones. "Those are my personalized weapons and armor, so they definitely must come." He then pointed to a couple of duffle bags sitting on top of the stack as he said, "And these two hold my clothes and personal gear, so they come. The rest are Quarian rations and miscellaneous stuff that's relatively easy to replace... and it's in no particular order... so we'll simply load to capacity and leave the rest. Sound good?"

Shepard nodded at Len'Dazza then turned and looked again at Legion. "I certainly understand if you can't do it but, if it's at all possible, please set aside what we leave behind... At some point in the near future, I'll contact you with a materials list and you can slip this in with the rest of what we order. You can make the run to Thessia and drop it all off at the Estate."

"That would be acceptable, Shepard Spectre." While the cargo was loaded, Legion inquired about the seemingly large number of commandos accompanying the Spectre, which limited the storage within the shuttle. Upon being told of the recent events on Thessia, he responded, "If you require my services, you simply need ask and I will make myself available."

Shepard smiled at her synthetic friend. "We're good, Legion, but thanks for the offer. As I already mentioned, I'd love to have you, but you have your own life now... so, until you run out of other things to keep you busy, I'll only call if we honestly need the back-up."

Legion started to respond and then paused for a moment, the lights on his chassis indicating communications with the Consensus. Inclining his head slightly, he said, "I have just been informed the relay is realigning to receive a vessel arriving from the Minos Wasteland; an irregular connection to be sure, yet suspiciously, the relay from which we arrived. You should depart now and dock at the CGC to avoid suspicion. You have eight minutes, thirty-two seconds before the relay opens for their arrival."

"Appreciate the heads-up." Shepard stretched out her hand and rapped her knuckles on the lower edge of the Prime's chest plate. "Whatever the circumstances, it's always good to see you in person, Legion."

"I am always... pleased... to see you as well, Shepard Spectre. Travel safely."

Shepard turned, calling out. "Time to go... Now!" She jogged back to the shuttle as she added, "You heard Legion... Everyone load up... and Thoni... launch as soon as the hatch is closed."
Chapter Notes

Notes: Headed out of town for a long weekend so, while you get this chapter a few hours earlier than normal, I’m afraid I will not have Ch 10 ready for next week. Have a great weekend and see you in two weeks! Enjoy!

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

Leannán - Lover (Gaelic)

Mo cheann geallta - My promised one (Gaelic)

Siame - “one who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Serrice Government Building, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 15 Jul 2188

Once the Matriarchal Governance Forum had officially opened, Mozia spoke quietly from her seat, gathering the attention of all those at the table. “I am confident each of you is aware of the single order of ceremonial business I am bringing to your forum today concerning the pending bonding between Lady Liara T'Soni and Spectre Samantha Shepard. You all know of the parties involved, so I will not waste your time with preliminary presentations; I will simply ask for a vote.” She glanced quickly around the table and asked, “Do any oppose the proposed bonding?”

Matriarch Luesia N'Tori, the Kendra Ocean Governess, rose from her chair and firmly stated, “I do... and I request an immediate Justicar Inquiry into the actions of Spectre Shepard in the Viper Nebula, regarding the destruction of its Mass Relay and the genocide of the Batarian peoples.”

The room erupted into chaos, a single voice of reason rising above the rest as the Justicar Grand Matriarch stepped forward. “Silence!” Sellyna's expression held only a hint of impatience as she waited for all the side conversations to cease. When she finally continued, her measured gaze fell squarely on Luesia. “Such an inquiry is your privilege. However, while Lady T'Soni and Spectre Shepard were sequestered for these proceedings should such an examination be required, in regard to the specific events you have identified, an inquest has already been completed. Justicar Samara was with Spectre Shepard during that timeframe and has already rendered a judgment. I will not duplicate her effort.”

Luesia growled in protest, “But Samara joined Shepard's crew and was bound by the Third Oath of Subsumation! Therefore, I submit that she could not possibly render an objective opinion on the matter... so I demand an inquiry be completed by an impartial party!”

Sellyna's eyes burned with frightening intensity, her voice as hard as steel as she emphasized Samara's position in her response. “Before Justicar Samara took the Oath, she warned Spectre Shepard that if any of her actions over the course of the war were deemed unjust, her life would potentially be forfeit once Samara was released from her service; such a warning proved unnecessary. At the conclusion of her time aboard the Normandy, Justicar Samara informed me, in
person, that Shepard's actions had been both just and necessary for the greater good. She found the Spectre free of guilt or fault, even considering the horrifying destruction of Bahak.”

Mozia stood slowly, her body stiff with uncharacteristic ire as she glared across the table at her adversary. “First, you object to a storybook union of two heroes who are very much in love... and then have the audacity to question the ruling of the Grand Matriarch of the Justicars? Have you gone completely insane?” Not giving Luesia time to answer, Mozia continued, “Spectre Shepard and Lady T'Soni did more to ensure our survival than all of you – all of us – combined! And yes, I include myself among the pitiful ruling matriarchs of Thessia, with all our supposed wisdom and biotic power, when I say that! Had it not been for Lady T'Soni's wisdom in sending Captain Aethyta Beuss to us, I would have been either dead or left sniveling in the shadows, praying for salvation.”

“Matriarch Mozia. Please sit and calm yourself.” The governess of Majesa placed a soothing hand on Mozia's arm, reminding her they were in general Forum. As Mozia nodded in appreciation and retook her seat, Matriarch Niana, the Armali District Governess, surprisingly took over the assault on Luesia. “What contributions did you make toward the war effort? Your isles were largely ignored by the Reapers and have flourished in the time since the war concluded, so before you object to Spectre Shepard and her union with House T'Soni, please explain to us what right you have to judge the actions of others, especially Spectre Shepard or the Justicars, when you have done absolutely nothing to aid in the war nor the recovery! How dare you!” She stared at Luesia in total silence as she waited for the matriarch to make some response... one which was not long in coming.

“Yes, I dare!” The minister stood swiftly; with an angry expression on her face, she met Niana’s eyes for a long moment before glancing around the entire table as she continued, “I dare because I am not one of your sniveling sycophants who hid during the war. I worked to ensure my own survival and all those under my charge. I worked in the shadows of the Reapers to establish mutual defense pacts and I now speak for the Consortium of Isle Nations!” She saw the concern flit through the eyes of the other matriarchs and sneered. “I see you understand the implications of what I have done.”

Matriarch Cyla of Serrice stood and glared at her. “Oh... We understand the implications, Luesia. We understand that you took advantage of our wartime preoccupation for your own benefit and you have committed treason! The whole purpose of our system is to maintain balance... to maintain a true democracy. You cannot make treaties and rearrange the political landscape of the Asari people without a majority approval of the Forum of Governesses... followed by a vote of the people! What you suggest throws balance to the whim of the tides and would never be approved!”

“I do not care about balance... nor about what you say I can or cannot do, because it is not a suggestion... it is already done.” Luesia's eyes returned to Mozia. “The Isle Nations are tired of being ignored so, while you were sniveling in the shadows, I put together a pact that now represents nearly two billion Asari citizens, many of whom were previously unrepresented!”

The Ulee governess, Ryria N'Axanni, remained seated and scoffed, “Oh, do shut up and sit down, Luesia.”

Ryria tapped her omnitool and continued, “The last census figures place the total remote isle nations' population, including Kendra Ocean, at less than 1.4 billion. The rest of us represent a remaining 3.7 billion, give or take, so I say we vote on this illegal act, get a list of all the signatories on this so-called pact, and convict them all of treason.” Her eyes traveled to Grand Matriarch Sellyna as she continued, “So, it seems you may not have traveled all the way here for nothing after all, Justicar.”

“Indeed.” Sellyna frowned at Luesia as she stated, “I had hoped my presence would be merely perfunctory and that my services would not actually be required.” She paused in thought for a
moment before continuing, “Based on current Asari law regarding formation of non-consensual pacts that change the relative balance between our designated political regions, it does appear as though we have a purposeful breach of electoral law.” Her attention shifted to the remaining matriarchs, those of which had been standing had also returned to their seats with Ryria's command to Luesia. “I will, however, refrain from judgment until a legal vote is completed.”

“Thank you, Justicar Sellyna.” Cyla stared at the table around which they all sat and drew a deep breath. “This is an unfortunate turn of events on what should have been a joyous day.” Her eyes came up and scanned the faces of those around the table, seeing both anger and disbelief; the first on the face of Luesia, the second residing with nearly everyone else. “The result of the vote shall be registered anonymously via your keypads, with the entry registered to Kendra Ocean locked out. Please enter your votes now.”

“I will not stand for such blatant disregard for my legal requests! I have every right to claim inquiry and I will not stand to be ignored!” Luesia slammed a fist down on the table, starting to glow blue in her anger and frustration before huffing loudly and turning away, walking toward the door. Sellyna signaled the Forum guards at the entrance and they drew stun weapons, ensuring Luesia would not be able to leave the chambers. As Luesia hesitated, unwilling to use force against the guards, the Justicar Grand Matriarch spoke stoically. “Matriarch Luesia N'Tori. In compliance with the Justicar Code and given your potential breach of Asari Electoral Law, you will stand down and remain on the premises until the Forum vote is completed and the results are announced. In the event you are found not guilty, you will be free to leave.”

Luesia took one last look at the readied guards and spun around. “And if I am found guilty?”

“Then you will surrender yourself to me willingly... for your own inquiry into your purported crime. You may yet be found innocent.”

“I won't be, I know.” Luesia held her chin high. “But you can rest assured, this will not end here. If I am imprisoned, I become a martyr... and I swear to you, the Isle Nations will make themselves heard, no matter how hard you attempt to suppress our voices.”

Matriarch Cyla of Serrice stood and looked to the Justicar. “I hesitate to announce the finding, but the votes are cast and it is my duty to announce that Matriarch Luesia N'Tori of the Kendra Ocean Republic, by a unanimous vote, has been found guilty of sedition.” Her attention shifted to the denounced Matriarch and she sighed. “I honestly believe your cause is just; your methods are what proved illegal. Why did you not come to us and ask for the other isle republics to be more fairly represented?”

Scoffing, Luesia spit out her question. “And just how would you have done that, Cyla?”

“I do not know,” she replied sadly. “But, perhaps, we could have done something along the lines of the new Galactic Council... where if not a senior member, they could at least have representation here.” She suddenly smiled. “And, just perhaps, they still can.”

Luesia's anger fell away like dry leaves in a heavy wind. “If what happened here today leads to such, then my actions will not have been in vain.”

“Come, Matriarch.” Sellyna held out a pair of biotic suppression cuffs. “Put these on yourself and come quietly. We are no longer the Justicars of old. If you cooperate, we may be able to achieve some... compromise... regarding your punishment. If what Matriarch Cyla says is true, perhaps only your methods were in error, while your cause is just. We shall see.”
Luesia looked at the Justicar a moment and found no deception in her gaze, so took the cuffs and slid them onto her wrists. “I suppose we will then, won’t we?”

Sellyna nodded to her before turning to the Forum once more. “May the Goddess guide your judgments... and let today's lessons not be lost to the annuls of history. Goddess be with you all.” With that said, she turned, took Luesia lightly by the arm, and they were gone.

The remaining Matriarchs sat in stunned silence and simply stared at one another for a few moments. Finally, Cyla shattered the stillness with a polite cough. “Well. That was... interesting... and something most certainly worth discussing.” She turned to Mozia as she continued, “But first, we have our original business to attend to. Does anyone else object to the bonding between Lady Liara T'Soni and Spectre Samantha Shepard?”

When she was met with only more silence, she smiled and nodded at Mozia. “Then so be it. The bonding of Lady T'Soni and Spectre Shepard is blessed by the Matriarchal Forum. The formal bonding license will be signed and forwarded to your house by the end of the evening.”

She turned to the Forum Adjutant General and whispered, “Please relay the news to Lady T'Soni and inform her that she and Spectre Shepard are free to leave.”

Turning back to the members still seated around the table, she smiled. “Now. I realize this was not on the agenda, but I do believe we need to speak about the recently identified lack of representation for the Isle Republics within the Forum...”

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T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 16 Jul 2188

Once the Matriarchal Forum had approved the T'Soni-Shepard union at their mid-July session, the next month leading up to the bonding passed like a blur. The whirlwind started on the day immediately following the vote, when Liara and Shepard had their next-to-last session with their mentors, this time as a joint session. Sha'ira and Aethyta sat side-by-side like the old friends they were as the Consort began the session. “Essentially, each of you is as prepared as we can make you... individually speaking. But, as you witnessed through our shared memory melds, there is much you need to do together, so that is what we are here to practice today.”

With that, Aethyta took over, stepping them through rehearsals for each of the numerous rituals that lay ahead. Sha’ira monitored their actions and responses, asking questions and providing correction as necessary when the couple were either unsure or made an error in the traditional, expected responses. After a solid three hours, Sha'ira nodded her head in approval. “Wonderful. I know this is tedious, but I do believe you've mastered the ceremony to a degree suitable to your station. We'll use our last session simply to complete another run-through... hopefully with no additional questions or any hesitation.”

“Thank the Goddess!” Liara exclaimed, a poignant smile of satisfaction on her face. “This reminds me of the Janiris festival practices with my mother and Shiala... but that singular ritual was simplistic compared to this.”

Sha'ira laughed softly before answering, “While that may be true, the Janiris rite was mastered by a young Asari, not yet even seventy years of age if I remember correctly. The bonding rituals are much more diverse and complicated, and we are exceedingly pleased by your amazingly quick mastery of them all. Most have a yearlong Promise Contract – one that has not been overtaken by a multi-year galactic war – during which they have weekly sessions until they know each and every part of all the segments by heart, Little Wing. Both you and Shepard should be proud to have
accomplished the feat in only twelve sessions instead of the standard thirty-five or forty.”

“Really?” Bewilderment filled Shepard upon the announcement. “All of that should have been spread over forty of these sessions, instead of cramming it all into a dozen?” With a confirming nod from Liara, Shepard groaned in realization, “No wonder they were so taxing!”

Aethyta growled jokingly, “They were so taxing because you're a damned Human, Shepard, and melding doesn't come naturally to you.”

“Ha ha.” Shepard smirked at her. “I'd offer up a real laugh, but it'd take too much energy and this pitifully weak Human is tired and starving, oh great and wise Matriarch.”

The resultant expression on Aethyta's face forced out a robust laugh from Sha'ira before she offered, “As all of us should be after this morning; excellent point, Shepard. We most definitely need to adjourn for lunch!”

“Adjourn? That makes it sound like we're coming back.” Shepard frowned as an uneasy feeling settled into her stomach, snapping her head around to stare at the Consort with the undesirable news. “Are we not done for the day?”

The disappointed expression on the Human's face weighed heavily on the Consort as she replied, “I am sorry, Captain. The ritual memorization sessions are complete, but now we have to work the venue details, the seating charts, your wardrobe... all the details surrounding the ceremony which have yet to be finalized. Perhaps you'll feel better after eating... and knowing that at this point you and Liara swap mentors?”

Expecting to see horrified shock, Shepard quickly looked at Liara and was mystified by the soft smile on the Asari's face. “T'Soni! You look like you knew this was coming... and you didn't tell me!”

“I did know... but it slipped my mind with everything else going on, Samantha. I'm sorry.” Her face filled with apology, she reached out and squeezed Shepard's hand. “For the upcoming planning, you need Sha’ira's expertise, as she is much more familiar with Human customs than my father could ever be... and I don't mind Dad's help in this phase.” Her gaze fluttered across Sha'ira and Aethyta before she returned her attention to her leannán to continue. “While Sha'ira is very good at the customs of other cultures, my father will be an excellent source of what is expected of the heir of House T'Soni as far as wardrobe and conduct. We'll also have Matriarch Mozia's assistance; as our representative on both to the Forum of Governesses and on the Defense Council, she will have critical insight regarding the seating arrangements, so we do not inadvertently offend someone. Even given the tediousness of the details at this juncture, I understand their importance and very much look forward our bonding going well, Siame.”

Her eyes lit up as Shepard glanced at Aethyta and grinned. “If your father can improve our chances to meet custom and not make any more enemies, then I'm happy to trade mentors, Mo cheann geallta.” Her focus shifting to the Consort, the Spectre continued, “And I'll be more than happy to have your assistance in the matter, Sha'ira. My goal for the ceremony has always been to blend our traditions as best able.”

“Then let us eat and I shall welcome the challenge, Captain!” Sha'ira stood and crooked her arm, inviting the woman to join her.

“So do I, Sha'ira,” Shepard responded as she stood from the loveseat and eagerly linked up with the offered arm. “After we eat, that is!”
Ashley had spent the twelve days since learning of Gabby's pregnancy scrutinizing the service records of the several potential replacements for the soon to be vacant position of propulsion engineer on the ship. She had also researched potential follow-on positions for the woman and spoken with commanders at two of the several Alliance shore facilities on Earth that were performing high-level research on the next generation of compact FTL drive cores. That part of the equation seemed as if it would rapidly solve itself; the Spectre had only needed to inform them of Gabby's involvement with the SR-2 project since its inception to set up an intense rivalry to be the facility employing Engineering Specialist Gabriella Daniels. Ashley had asked for – and received – assurances that Gabby would be granted maternity leave when the time came; surprisingly, the commander of the Vancouver research station had even offered to promote the engineer as soon as she arrived.

Of the potential replacements Donnelly had suggested, six people were stand-outs; each of them was extremely qualified, with four being nearly the equal of Daniels in terms of experience and knowledge of sub-light and FTL propulsion theory. Ashley had given copies of their service records to Greg Adams, believing him to be a better judge of the qualities needed for the job. As expected, Adams had been absolutely crushed at the prospect of losing Gabby to a forced transfer, telling Williams he would have much preferred to see Donnelly leaving the Normandy.

All of this and more blazed through her mind as she stood at parade rest, resplendent in her dress uniform, her back towards the elevator tower forward bulkhead in the crew's mess area. Immediately in front of her stood Donnelly and Daniels, with Greg Adams a step behind and to Gabby's right side, with all three similarly clothed in their dress uniforms; behind them were Steve Cortez, Edi, Joker, Doctor Chakwas and several other of the crew.

Ashley cleared her throat and smiled happily at the assemblage of people before her. “Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would have command of a ship and crew as wonderful as the Normandy... much less have the pleasure of presiding over the wedding of two of our own. Today, it is my singular honor... and privilege... to preside over the marriage of Kenneth Donnelly and Gabriella Daniels. So, without further ado...,” She opened and began to read aloud from a small, leather-bound book she had found in Shepard's former quarters. “We are here today to witness and celebrate the marriage of two persons who are very much in love. More than just a ceremony, this is the most significant moment of human celebration and personal commitment. Marriage is not something to be entered into lightly. We are concerned with more than simply romance; it should be entered into reverently, or it is no marriage at all.” She paused, looked at Gabby for a moment, then asked, “Who gives this bride away?”

Greg Adams stepped up beside Gabby; taking her hand, he answered, “It is my distinct honor to stand in for Gabriella's father on this solemn occasion, and I freely give her hand in marriage to this man.” Adams released her hand and stepped back.

Ashley smiled at Greg before returning her attention to the couple before her. “This ceremony will not unite you in marriage; only the two of you can do that. If the relationship, which is symbolized in our culture by the state of marriage, does not already exist between you, this ceremony will not create that relationship. The bond uniting you is the entire meaning. This ceremony is simply the public announcement of the existence of that bond.”

Ashley solemnly continued, “A good marriage is a relationship of love and respect, to have a deep sense of identification with another person. It is to live in the life of that person, feeling his or her joys and sorrows as if they were your own. There should be a sharing of your lives, but there should
also be space in your togetherness that allows each of you the room and privacy required to be individuals, with hearts and minds of your own; for only by being a whole person, can you have something to give to the person that you love."

“So, having considered alone and together this marriage, I now ask you, Gabriella, do you take this man to be your husband? Do you promise to love him and to comfort him, to honor him, and keep him in sickness and in health, in prosperity and adversity, as long as you both shall live?”

Gabby reached over with her left hand to grasp Ken's as she softly replied, “I so promise.”

Ashley smiled at Gabby briefly before turning to Donnelly. “Then I now ask you, Kenneth, do you take this woman to be your wife? Do you promise to love her and comfort her, to honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health, in prosperity and adversity, as long as you both shall live?”

Kenneth turned to look into Gabby's eyes. After a couple of moments of complete silence, he managed to squeak out, “Ah sae promise.”

Holding up a pair of platinum and gold rings, the Spectre handed the larger of the two rings to Gabby as she intoned, “Then Gabriella, as you place this ring on Kenneth's finger, please say with me, ‘With this ring… I thee wed… and join my life to yours.’” Gabby repeated the words and Ashley then waited as the bride slid the band onto the groom’s finger. Handing the remaining ring to Kenneth, she said, “And Kenneth, as you place this ring on Gabriella's finger, please say with me, 'With this ring, I thee wed, and join my life to yours.'”

Grinning at Ken's pitiful attempt to say the words with as little brogue as possible, she set the book from which she was reading down and grasped Gabby's left hand and Ken's right as she concluded, “May these rings stand as a sign to you of your desire to live, to love, to create, and to build in your lives and the lives of those whom you touch, that ideal of perfection which is humanity. When the tides are low and the rocks are painfully visible, may your love be the waters of the new tides. And, when the tides are high, give thanks to the spirit of life itself, and celebrate it.”

She released their hands, stepped forward slightly and placed a hand on each of their shoulders, saying, “So, having openly declared yourselves in accordance with the laws of Earth's Systems Alliance and the Galactic Council, before everyone here, before the community of humanity and most of all, before your own inner selves, I now pronounce that you are husband and wife.”

Releasing their shoulders and stepping back, she grinned at Donnelly as she concluded with, “You may now kiss your bride.”

Everyone began applauding as Ken engulfed Gabby in a full body hug and kissed her, only to be surprised by her follow-on as he attempted to break away to take a breath. When they finally parted, it was not clear which of the pair was blushing more, although Donnelly was probably the winner. Watching the pair being congratulated by everyone present brought a few tears to Ashley's eyes, which she didn't bother to wipe away. When things calmed down slightly, Gabby walked up to her commander and quietly said, “Just this once, I am going to break protocol. Thank you, Ma'am... for everything.” With that, she wrapped her arms around the Spectre, tightly embracing the surprised woman.

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T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 22 Jul 2188

Having received a tasking from Liara, Samantha Traynor had pulled all the broker equipment from storage and was working in a secondary, secluded secure communications room inside the main house. She was thankful Aethyta had thought to bring all the equipment with them when they had
evacuated the townhouse during the Reaper War – otherwise, Traynor would have had a lot more work ahead of her, as it all would have been destroyed along with everything else when the Reapers had ravaged Armali. So, instead of having to purchase it all new, she was simply reassembling the existing spare system and sequentially powering up the individual components to ensure each piece was in good working order. Once that was completed, Sammi then connected the newly reassembled broker station to the network and was now in the process of downloading the latest versions of all the software.

Traynor was preparing to break for lunch while the system updated, but a priority call intruded on her peaceful morning. She checked the sender's identity and was pleasantly surprised as she entered her pass-code and responded, “Commander Williams? I didn't expect to hear from the Normandy for a few more weeks. To what do we owe the pleasure?” Sammi was suddenly thinking about everything that was happening in the galaxy as she nervously asked, “You're still coming, aren't you? Is everything alright?”

Ashley grinned at the Normandy's former communications specialist. “Of course we are, Ms Traynor… and we are all doing well… I simply needed to speak with Shepard or Dr T'Soni. I have a few things I needed to discuss… final lodging and transportation arrangements and such. Is either of them available?”

The relief Sammi felt at hearing that nothing was amiss on the Normandy brought forth a smile as she replied, “I'm afraid both are away at the moment; they've taken the Knight Shade on a practice run, using it to pick up a new crewmember at the port in Armali. Would you care to share your message with me? Our conversation is being recorded – standard procedure – but I'd be happy to pass on anything you care to tell me.”

Williams looked down for a moment as she thought about what she needed to say. Returning her gaze to Traynor, she replied, “First off, due to our current mission, we'll only have a short time available for our visit to Thessia, Specialist. We'll arrive the day before the bonding ceremony and need to set out early morning of the day after, so I wanted to make sure Shepard and Liara aren't counting on us to give anyone a ride.”

Sammi immediately had all kinds of questions she'd like Williams to answer about their current mission, but held herself in check as she replied, “Regarding lodging and transportation, it may actually be the House Steward you need to speak with, though I'm not really sure, Commander. With all the vessels we have scattered about, I really cannot believe it would be a problem… and there's plenty of room for the Normandy to park right here...”

“That’s great to hear. I also have news to share… I can tell you, but you have to promise not to pass it on… I want to tell them myself and see the expressions on their faces.” Ashley grinned. “Can I trust you to do that?”

“Understood, Commander.” Traynor nodded as she said, “Pausing recording now.” She gave Ashley a quick nod, acknowledging it was safe for the Spectre to continue.

“I had the distinct honor, for the first time as captain of my own ship, to conduct a wedding…” Williams’ face was split by a wide grin as she continued, “…for Kenneth and Gabriella Donnelly!”

Traynor’s eyes flew open wide in surprise as she gasped, “Holy Hell! That’s… awesome… and a long time in coming!” She regained her composure a bit and laughed, “I can see why you want to be the one to tell them!” Pausing for a moment as her mouth shifted from a grin to a big ‘O’ in realization, she added, “But how does that impact their assignments on the Normandy? Alliance regs are pretty clear about married couples on a ship as small as a war frigate…”
“Yes, they are… so one of them will have to leave the Normandy, but I’ll leave that story for them to tell once we arrive on Thessia.” Ashley smiled softly as she continued, “So, remember… not a peep about the wedding to Shepard or Liara.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Traynor smiled as she said, “And now, I’m really looking forward to your visit in August! If that’s everything you want to pass on in person?”

“Yes, it is… so go ahead and resume your recording whenever you’re ready.” Ashley waited patiently as the specialist nodded and toggled the necessary controls.

“Recording resumed, Commander. I’ll have one or the other… or both… contact you as soon as possible after the Knight Shade returns.”

“Thank you, Traynor. I look forward to hearing back from Liara or the captain soon.” With that, she terminated the connection, leaving Sammi to stare for a moment at a blank screen as she contemplated what she had just learned.

So, who is going to end up getting transferred off the Normandy?

Knowing the question would be answered in due course, the specialist secured the communications equipment and headed for the dining area for lunch.

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Shepard and Liara were on their way up to their suite when Samantha Traynor intercepted them in the main foyer. “Captain? Dr T’Soni? I have a message for you from the Normandy. Spectre Williams would appreciate a return call. She needs to confirm a few details with you to finalize the Normandy’s visit to Thessia.”

Surprise was evident in Liara’s expression as she glanced at Shepard before asking. “Did she tell you what information she needs, Specialist? Did she give any indication they may not make it?”

Sammi grinned as she replied, “She mentioned lodging and transportation, Ma’am, but also said something about a special announcement… so I believe she prefers to speak with both of you.”

Liara cast a wary glance at Traynor. The woman was normally meticulous about how she did her job… but something in Sammi’s expression hinted the specialist was holding information back… but, at the same time, she was happy, indicating to the Broker that it was not bad news. All things considered, it gladdened Liara’s heart that the human had found a home for herself here at the estate. [I know we would manage without her here, Siame, and I am honestly pleased Specialist Traynor has joined our family… but, in this case, I do believe she knows exactly what Ashley wants to tell us in person.]

A smile came through the link in return as her promised laughed lightly in response. [Agreed, Blue… and I expect Riana is even happier than you that Traynor decided to join her here.]

Her face lighting with a smile, Liara replied to the specialist, “Thank you, Ms Traynor. Give us fifteen minutes to change clothes and freshen up a bit. Then, we’ll very likely see you in the comm room.” So saying, Liara hooked her arm into Shepard’s and the pair made their way to their suite.

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Liara and Shepard changed into comfortable clothing and made their way back downstairs to the Estate’s main communications center; Sammi glanced past her shoulder as the door opened to admit the pair, eliciting a warm smile. Turning back to the viewscreen, Traynor said, “Here they are now, Commander. See you in a few weeks.” She stood and stepped to the side, vacating her chair so Shepard could sit down, with Liara taking the chair beside her. “I figured I could have the
connection up and ready… save you both the trouble.”

Of some surprise, Ashley had been joined by Gabriella Daniels and Kenneth Donnelly, causing Shepard to be more formal than she had planned. “Commander Williams… It’s great to see you! How goes things on the Normandy?”

“Very well, thanks.” A broad smile dominated the Spectre’s face as she said, “We all wanted the two of you to be the among the first people off the ship to congratulate Gabby and Ken Donnelly on their recent marriage… presided over by yours truly aboard the Normandy!”

Liara and Shepard had been aware since the St Paddy's Day party during the Victory Tour that Ken and Gabby planned to marry, but that didn't lessen their surprise at Ashley's announcement. “That's wonderful news! Congratulations, you guys!” Shepard gushed as Liara offered her own congratulations. Thoughts flew fast and furious through the link for a couple of seconds before Liara asked, “So Gabby… I imagine you and Kenneth had a reception party already?”

Gabby quietly replied, “Yes, Ma'am, we had a small one with the crew… but we talked about it, and honestly, we hoped… well, I was hoping… that we could horn in on your and Captain Shepard’s reception. It'd be really nice to be able to visit with everyone, since we already know most of the commandos, as well as Matriarchs Aethyta and Mozia… and we assumed the Broker teams would be there, as well… and everyone would find out about it when we visit, anyway.”

Gabby had never been a poker player and Shepard could plainly see something was troubling her, even over the somewhat grainy video feed, so she passed her concerns through the link.

Liara smiled as she replied, “Why would you even think we'd deny you that opportunity, Gabby? It will be no more difficult to have a party for two newlywed couples than for just Sam and myself… so, of course you'll be welcome to join us! It will make the day that much more special for all of us.”

Samantha smiled at the images as she said, “Gabby, you do remember I was your captain for a couple of years, and I was generally able to read people fairly well; I can see there's something bothering you.” Shepard paused for a moment as she witnessed the different emotions playing out on Gabby's face. “Is there something else you need to ask of us?”

“No, Ma'am… nothing to ask.” The engineering specialist ducked her head momentarily in obvious embarrassment, casting a sidelong glance at Ashley before raising her eyes to look straight at the video image of Shepard. “But I do want to tell you I'm leaving the Normandy after we depart Thessia.” She squared her shoulders and added, “I'm transferring to the Alliance's new propulsion lab on the CGC… because I'm going to have a baby, Ma'am.”

Shepard was struck speechless by Gabby's confession, so Liara gushed, “Gabby, that's so wonderful! Congratulations… on your marriage and on your pregnancy!”

Ashley grinned at the pair as she said, “As a mom-to-be, Gabby can’t continue to serve aboard a frigate, but she wanted to stay in the Navy as a propulsion engineer… so I secured her a choice assignment where she'll be working on experimental sub-light and FTL drive technologies for the Alliance.” Ash chuckled as she added, “Once I released her name, I heard rumors of fist-fights breaking out over who was going to have the privilege of getting her on staff.”

“I'm not surprised in the slightest… she’s definitely a great catch.” Shepard then asked with a grin, “So, I assume Donnelly will be leaving as well?”

“Actually, no. I can't afford to lose Ken and Gabby, Skipper. Even with Greg Adams here, I'll need Ken to help teach Gabby’s replacement everything about how the SR-2's engines are supposed
to work. Fortunately, Admiral Hackett agreed with my assessment, saying even though they're both members of the Alliance Navy, being a Spectre gives me a certain degree of latitude concerning the crew I choose for the Normandy… and that I could keep Ken aboard.” She paused and shrugged before continuing, “Besides which, Ken wants to stay; he told me he’d go bonkers within a month of being stuck on a space station.” Ashley chuckled, “He’s starting to sound like Dr Chakwas… something about needing a moving deck beneath his feet.”

“That's wonderful, Ash. And Gabby, your secret is safe with us; it’s not our news to share.” Shepard was delighted that Gabby was going to stay in the Navy. “We look forward to seeing you on the fourteenth!”

“Thank you, Ma'am. I'm looking forward to seeing both of you on Thessia.”

Before the connection was terminated, Liara smiled and offered, “And Gabby… Should you desire to deliver your baby planet-side rather than on a space station, you would be more than welcome to spend your maternity leave here, with us.” A wide grin split Gabby’s face as Liara continued, “We have a full-time doctor on staff, obviously well versed on Human medical care, and we would consider it an honor to help you bring your first child into the world.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Gabby stuttered, “That… Gosh! That would be lovely, Dr T'Soni! Are you sure?”

Smiling, Shepard chuckled, “Absolutely, Gabby! Can’t wait to see you!” Looking back at the commander, she continued, “That goes for all of you, Ash. See you in a few weeks.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The wedding performed by Ashley was derived from a sample ceremony on the Hornblower Cruises and Events – San Diego website, under their wedding resources > weddings performed by captain.
Chapter Notes

*B'duero* – a native Thessian tree similar in appearance to the silver birch

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

*Chandra* - insect resembling a honeybee, same name as sweetening nectar it produces (Asari)

*Grá mo chroí* - love of my heart (Gaelic)

*Lughnasadh* - Gaelic festival marking the beginning of the harvest season

*Mo cheann geallta* - My promised one (Gaelic)

*Siame* - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

XO - Executive Officer

*Yefal* - green leaves similar to romaine lettuce (Source: CDN)

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 31 Jul 2188

With their preparation time nearly at an end, Shepard filled the final four days of July performing battle drills aboard the *Knight Shade*, combined with the use of various Republican Guard training facilities to complete a significant number of building-breach and ground combat training exercises. When they returned to the Estate on the afternoon of the thirty-first, the House Guard Captain Lyria Tremi and an unknown Human female were relaxing on the front steps of the house awaiting them. The new sniper, Minda Tilghman, had finally arrived to complete the Spectre’s second ground team.

After the initial introductions, Liara gave her a puzzled smile. “If you had contacted us, we would have arranged transportation from the port. Let me know how much it cost, and I will gladly reimburse you for the expense.”

Tilghman’s face held an easy smile and she shrugged. “Your house steward already made the offer… which I turned down. The signing bonus I received from you was more than adequate to cover any expenses I could have possibly incurred… I could have even hired a private, luxury corvette with that many credits!”

The woman’s smile turned to a gentle smirk as she continued, “Besides which, I treated it as a mission; it gave me a chance to practice my recon and figure a way here without detection. It was actually a bit of a test… which you passed with flying colors, by the way.” A brief, quiet chuckle preceded her final judgement as she stated, “Getting here was easy enough, but then… I found absolutely no way onto the grounds where I would remain undetected… So, I ended up ringing the damned bell at the front gate. An impressive feat for a place with such a large perimeter.”

Liara raised a brow marking in surprise as Shepard laughed. “Only because you didn’t have any
prep time, didn’t want to make any loud bangs or blow up anything of ours as a distraction… nor risk getting yourself killed before you had a chance to introduce yourself, seeing as you had no way to anticipate how the commandos would respond. But I know from experience that no location is impenetrable… it just depends on what risks you’re willing to take and how much you’re willing to sacrifice.”

“Agreed, Spectre Shepard… and I honestly did come here for what appears to be an excellent job, which necessitates not getting killed upon arrival. Such a slip wouldn’t make for a very good first impression.” Tilghman was already grinning, but her eyes also lit up as the Spectre teams strolled up the walkway. “Harley Creath, as I live and breathe! Now I understand where Dr T’Soni got my name! I figured you an Alliance man for life. What the Hell are you doing here? With a Spectre team patch on your shoulder, no less!”

Creath laughed. “Well, I made N7, Shepard here needed a second for one of her ground teams, and Admiral Hackett gave her my résumé. I apparently passed muster, then had to agree to work for this massive hulk behind me, Commander Hailot Jatok, and here I am. Couldn’t think of a better sniper to cover my six, so I offered up your name to the Spectre when I learned we still needed to fill the position.”

Tilghman punched him in the shoulder before giving him a big hug. “Thanks! I appreciate the recommendation.” She glanced at Shepard before looking at Lady Liara. “I did my research before forwarding my acceptance of your offer. Spectre Shepard, as well as House T’Soni, has quite the reputation… and I figured no better offer than the one I held in my hands was ever going to come my way, so I’d be downright foolish to turn it down.”

“That’s very likely true.” Shepard tempered her jovial welcome as she got down to business. Looking at Lyria, she asked, “Since I see no bags or gear, I assume our sniper has been assigned a home station weapons locker and a bunk in the commando quarters?”

Captain Tremi nodded. “Yes, Ma’am. I placed her with Kaddi; made sense to keep the team together… and Kaddi can show her around. I also have Minda scheduled for an initial medical exam with Dr Yandle first thing in the morning.”

“Excellent.” Liara nodded in appreciation. “Just don’t forget that tomorrow is one of Shepard’s… one of our new holidays, celebrating the year’s first harvests – Lughnasadh – and that Admiral Shepard arrives on the morning shuttle from the CGC.”

“Oh, I haven’t, Lady Liara.” Lyria flashed a knowing smile. “I have Arlis and Team 2 scheduled to depart in VIP-1 at 0930 hours to go pick her up. Will you or Captain Shepard be going along?”

Shepard grinned. “I’ll be going for sure. Unless there’s some major emergency, Mom would have an unkind word or two for me if I’m not there to greet her at the terminal.” She glanced sorrowfully at Liara as she continued, “But you have your morning meeting with Lyessa and Chef Leyana to go over the prebonding dinner and the reception menus, don’t you?”

“I’m afraid so… though, I suppose I could change it if you really want me to come along…” Liara looked almost hopeful as she made the statement, which sounded more like a question.

Shepard laughed gently before responding softly, “I’m sure Mom will understand, Mo cheann geallta. I’m sorry I can’t provide you a better excuse.”

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Spaceport, Armali Republic, Thessia – 1 Aug 2188
Hannah’s eyes were scanning the sea of faces, trying to find the one that belonged to her daughter. When their eyes finally met, a broad smile lit her countenance and she surged forward, wrapping her arms around the younger woman in a loving embrace. “Gods, it’s good to see you!” Grabbing ahold of her daughter’s shoulders, she pushed back to arms’ length and examined her before adding, “You look good, Sam. You apparently recovered quite nicely, but…” Her hand came across to trail fingers lightly along the lash scar still evident on the neck of her only child. “This is more prominent than it used to be, for sure. I suppose making that disappear after the bad luck of getting a lash wrapped around your neck over your old scar was too much to hope for, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was, Mom.” She shrugged. “But Doctors T’Lori and Yandle are still working on it, and are still making some progress, so haven’t given up yet. If necessary, they can always cut the whole section out and graft cloned skin over my weave… but it’s a rather lengthy procedure that has some risk of changing my single ring into two. However minimal, I don’t want to take a chance of making it look worse right before the bonding. The high neck of the dress uniform will keep it hidden, anyway.”

“I’m sorry; you know I didn’t mean it as a slight against your doctors here. It’s just…” She huffed and shook her head. “I don’t know what I meant, Sam, other than it’s a shock to see it in person. It looks like someone tried to take your head off… and it makes me worry about you.”

Shepard grinned and hugged her mother tightly. “It’s okay, Mom. Isn’t one of your jobs as a parent to worry about your kid?”

Pushing away, Hannah growled, “Oh, you!” and then looked around in question. “By the way, where’s Liara?”

“She’s stuck at the Estate with Steward Lyessa and Chef Leyana, going over all the menus for the upcoming events.” Shepard sighed apologetically, “Time is running out and it seems like there’s still way too much to get done before the bonding.”

Hannah chuckled, “Don’t you worry about that, kiddo. It will all get done with time to spare and then you’ll be nervously pacing around… going crazy without enough to keep you occupied!”

“Hey!” Shepard suddenly grinned, a quick prod through the link reminding her of what else was going on back at the Estate. “You remember this time last year?”

“Oh Gods, yes!” Hannah rolled her eyes before continuing, “I came to you on the Normandy because Liara was in surgery after that lunatic Human tried to assassinate her!”

“Yeah. And I distinctly remember saying something about ‘fuck Lughnasadh’ and that you weren’t very happy with me for saying it.” A grin spread across her face as she continued, “I promise you, this year will be very different.”

Hannah’s eyes opened wide. “With all the bonding preparations going on… Are we actually going to have a harvest feast?”

“Absolutely… and much more than that! We’re doing the whole holiday up right… and we’re starting by going to pick lettuce!” At the odd look her mother gave her, Samantha laughed and explained, “It’s early in the season here, and the only main crop that’s ready for harvest here is yefal, a green leafy vegetable that tastes remarkably like romaine.”

Smirking in return, her mother answered with, “I suppose Liara is trying hard to adapt to our holidays, isn’t she… but… really? Lettuce is the best you could do?”
“Hey, don’t knock it!” She reached out and gave her mother a gentle push on the shoulder. “It’s pretty tasty… and when on Thessia…”

Hannah smiled and finished, “Do as the Asari do. Got it, kiddo.”

“Exactly!” Shepard wrinkled her nose as she continued, “We do have another choice. They love their seafood, so we could go down and clean fish at the docks. That’s the only other major foodstuff being collected right now.”

“Oh, Gods no!” Hannah made an answering face and then chuckled. “I’m happy to eat it, but cleaning it? No thank you!”

“That’s what I figured… so, lettuce picking we go… *after* we check in at the Estate, so you can say hello to Liara and get introduced to the staff.”

T’Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 1 Aug 2188

“Oh, Sam! This place is positively gorgeous!” Hannah’s jaw fell as she watched the approach to the private landing field. “Honestly? This is where you’ll live full time when you retire?”

“I know, right?” Shepard grinned. “I knew this was where we were going to live as soon as I saw the place. I was thrilled to find out Liara felt the same way… though, I have to admit, Aethyta did wonders with the Armali house. It was destroyed during the war and she was in charge of the rebuild. Much more traditional, instead of that sterile neo-modern architecture that Liara’s mother liked.”

“I’m thinking I know where I’ll be coming for leave time.” Hannah spared her daughter only a quick glance before turning her attention back to the breathtaking view. “And you have a beach! That clinches it! No more trips to Rio for me!”

“You’ll always be welcome here, Mom; anytime you want to come… even if the Knight Shade is out of port, with her captain and executive officer along with her.” Laughing, Samantha stood from her seat and reached out her hand in invitation. “Now, come on. It’s time to see the place, in person, with your feet on the ground instead of peeking out through the window.”

Liara was loitering impatiently at the edge of the parking apron as the VIP-1 landed; after the core shut down and their guest emerged through the hatch, Lady Liara attempted to walk at a dignified pace, but as she got closer and could see the joyous smile upon the woman’s face, her composure broke and she bolted the last few meters to the woman, happily allowing herself to be wrapped tightly in a motherly embrace.

Tears streamed down Liara’s cheeks, only to be wiped away by Hannah as she pushed back from the hug and said. “Tears of happiness, I hope,” as a wide grin dominated her face. “It is so good to see you, Liara! It’s been much too long!”

Liara laughed gleefully as she answered, “Most definitely… on both counts! How was your trip?” She stepped to Hannah’s side and looped their arms together, turning toward the house and starting to walk as Samantha joined them, walking along on the other side of her mother.

“It was quick, thanks to the private transport.” Hannah looped her free arm loosely around Samantha’s waist as they walked. “Besides… I believe my staff at work was ready to be rid of me. I’ve been absolutely impossible to work with the last few days because I’ve been all caught up with planning this trip.”
“Well, it’s wonderful to finally have you here.” Liara wouldn’t have been able to get the smile off her face if she had wanted to, and she affectionately squeezed Hannah’s arm once more before releasing her grip in order to enter the main house. “The commandos will take your bags to your room while we make a few quick introductions. Then, you’ll have time to get cleaned up and into comfortable walking clothes before we head out to the fields for the *Lughnasadh* harvest.”

Hannah stopped for a moment, causing Liara to pause and look questioningly at the woman. As their eyes met, Hannah said, “Liara. I want you to know I recognize how gracious you are being at accepting our customs. Druidry isn’t exactly a common religion on Earth…”

“No. Please.” Liara raised a hand and gave her head a little shake in rebuttal. “I can easily relate, as there are not many followers of the Athame doctrine anymore, either… particularly after the Prothean’s insinuations concerning the religion’s origins; many have converted to Siari.” She paused as a coy smile slipped onto her face. “Hannah, I love your daughter dearly… everything about her… not to mention that I find your customs fascinating.” She smiled at Samantha, who was grinning back at her as she continued, “And honestly? It’s not about acceptance or tolerance… it’s about merging our beliefs into a union of their own that comes along with our bonding. We try to work as one… in *all* things.”

Shepard added, “And it’s not just her, Mom; she’s speaking for the whole T’Soni household! They don’t have many holidays of their own…” She paused for a moment in consideration and glanced at Liara. “Matter of fact, I think there is only one… Janiris! Gods. Is that right, Liara?”

Smiling softly, the Asari answered, “Yes… It marks the renewal of life and the Asari New Year.” She shrugged. “We live so long we don’t even celebrate birthdays as you do. Instead, we choose to celebrate our life events… such as the earning of specialty degrees in things like dance or commando training… or various levels of educational achievements… and when we transition to become a matron and then a matriarch.” She laughed at herself and continued, “I’m sorry. I did not intend to give you a lecture on Asari culture. My point was that we are simply looking forward to more opportunities to celebrate life. Your holidays are a welcome addition.”

“Well…” Hannah smiled at the young Asari. “Even if you did feel like it was a lecture, it was good information and it helps me better understand how we all fit together, so I thank you.” Glancing between the two lovebirds, Hannah continued, “So, how about we make all those introductions, let me get changed, and go pick some *Yefal*?”

After returning with their first seasonal harvest in honor of the holiday, Liara and Samantha took her mother on a full tour of the grounds, including the white garden where Shepard had proposed to her Asari lover. “I learned this was one of Liara’s favorite retreats when she was younger. It seemed a natural location…”

“And I was more than surprised.” Liara laughed softly. “Her unexpected proposal struck me nearly speechless… which made it rather difficult for me to accept her Promise Vow.”

“Which immediately made *me* think I screwed something up regarding protocol.” Shepard grinned as she continued, “I was starting to get seriously worried when Liara finally managed to say something.” She shook her head as she recalled the event. “I was used to Liara’s shyness back then, but that day? She scared the crap out of me!”

They all laughed together as they continued the tour, making the yellow garden their last stop in order to gaze upon Matriarch Benezia’s recently placed memorial. They had all fallen silent as they approached, but Hannah couldn’t help but comment. “It’s a beautiful tribute.” She knelt at the base
of the pillar and read the words in a hushed voice, “With her last breath, she fought to bring light to the darkness.” She looked up to Liara and stood slowly to wrap loving arms around her future daughter-in-law.

Whispering in Liara’s ear, Hannah’s voice reflected both her personal sense of loss and Liara’s sadness. “I regret never having the opportunity to meet your mother. From all I have heard of her, it is most definitely to my detriment.”

“I do wish she could be here for this.” Liara’s eyes were glassy but she shed no tears as her face picked up a shy smile. “She was always concerned I would spend my life alone, so she would be very happy with the current course of events.”

“Then I will be happy enough for the both of us… Though I am positive your father is also pleased with the state of affairs.” Hannah laughed as Liara rolled her eyes.

“Goddess, yes… and she never ceases to take every opportunity to tease me about it.” The now blushing Asari cleared her throat and continued, “Anyway. I guess it is time to return to the house. We have an evening of celebration planned, filled with a harvest dinner followed by entertainment and dancing.”

“Oh! It sounds lovely, my dear!” Hannah smiled and looked around the garden one last time before focusing on Samantha. “I am so looking forward to this vacation!”

The next morning, Hannah made her way downstairs and found her way to the kitchen. She was welcomed easily by numerous smiling commandos who were more than happy to point their honored guest in the right direction to find breakfast. As she stepped into the dining area, she was met by Lyessa. “Good morning, Admiral! I see your military habits die as hard as those of our Captain. You cannot sleep in… even when on vacation!”

“Poor Sam had to grow up that way… most of our assignments were aboard ship and she had to live on our schedule, so it comes naturally to her. And please, call me Hannah?” The woman looked around hopefully as she queried, “Sam told me that you have Terran coffee?”

Laughing lightly, Lyessa replied, “But of course, Hannah. Follow me to the kitchen and I will show you where everything is. You are welcome to make yourself at home… Samantha certainly does. Half the time, I find her down here making the coffee because she gets up before I do!” Lyessa opened a cabinet and pulled down a mug, handing it to woman before pointing to a small side table. “The chandra is there…” Her focus shifted as she continued, “the creamer is in the cooler, over there, and your coffee is in this black carafe to the left of the stove.”

As she spoke, Lyessa lifted the carafe and held it up to pour. “Oh!” Hannah quickly held her mug out and smiled. “Thank you! The way you pointed everything out, I thought I was on my own… which, by the way, would be perfectly fine. Now that I know where everything is… and you said I was free to make myself at home… I won’t bother you when I’m ready for a refill.”

As she moved to the small table, Lyessa cautioned her, “The chandra is much sweeter than your Human sugar or honey… at least that is what Samantha has told us… so I would use it sparingly and experiment a bit.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Hannah spooned only a couple of small crystals into her mug, stirred and tasted it before adding a third. She was smiling in satisfaction as she said, “Perfect! She’s right; it’s much more potent than what we normally use. Without your warning, I would have dropped a full
teaspoon in!” She glanced around and shrugged before asking, “So. When do the kids normally come down?”

At that, Lyessa laughed. “Samantha came down almost an hour ago to say hello to all the commandos during their shift change. She is most likely in her office catching up on messages. Let me put some chandra in a small bowl and grab the coffee carafe and I’ll take you to her. Actually, I am surprised she has not already returned for a refill.”

“She gets caught up in her work, doesn’t she?” Hannah smiled wistfully as she continued, “I suppose she takes after both her father and I in that regard.”

Shepard looked up and smiled as Lyessa entered the room, standing quickly to greet her and then give her mother a hug. “Good morning, Mom. How’d you sleep?”

“Better than I have in months!” Hannah beamed at her daughter as she continued, “I cracked the window to let in the ocean breeze and I could hear the waves on the beach… the morning birds calling… It was delightfully serene!”

“I figured you’d like a shoreside room; glad I suggested it.” Shepard’s attention shifted to the one who had arranged it for her. “Thanks, Lyessa. If Liara happens to get up any time soon, let her know Mom and I are taking a walk along the beach?”

“Absolutely… and I will let Lyria know as well.” The face of the House Steward held an apologetic smile, knowing how Shepard always felt she was imposing on the commandos’ day… simply by leaving the house. No matter how much she recognized the necessity, Shephard felt her newly established need to be accompanied everywhere had to be downright inconvenient for the staff, having to stop whatever they were doing in order to ‘guard’ the Lady T’Soni’s Promised, even when Liara wasn’t coming along.

Her daughter’s quiet sigh of frustration caught Hannah’s attention, so Samantha explained the new policies that had been instituted since the kidnapping, following with, “I know it needs to be done, but it feels ridiculous… especially in cases like this. I mean really? I’m just going to walk on the beach with my mother!”

“And all you did was go to the local Farmer’s Market to get vegetables.” Smirking, Hannah picked up her coffee mug and took a step toward the door as a silent prompt to get their walk started. “I’m all for it, Sam. Particularly if I know it will keep you that much safer… You always were one to find trouble, whether you meant to or not!”

“I know, Mom… I helped put the damned policy in place because I see the need and I realize it’s something I have to get used to… but it doesn’t mean I have to like it.” Shrug in acceptance, she picked up her newly refilled mug and headed toward the door. “As for me finding trouble, it seems to always come looking for me, no matter how I try to avoid it.” Opening the door for her mother, she concluded, “Come on. Let’s hope you like the beach here as much as the one in Rio, because it sure would be nice to see you more often.”

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T’Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 4 Aug 2188

As her first weekend at the Estate came and went, Hannah settled easily into the household routine, frequently starting her day early with a walk along the beach with her daughter. Monday was no
The last time she had seen them was aboard the Normandy on Saint Patrick’s Day, which hadn’t been nearly long enough to honestly get caught up with the pair, much less get to know the myriad of commandos who had also come along for the party. After all her initial introductions, Hannah had simply shaken her head, contemplating how Liara, so young by Asari standards, ruled a Thessian high house, which consisted of two major holdings as well as properties and apartments scattered about the galaxy. Just on Thessia alone, the maiden was ultimately responsible for a staff of well over fifty – and that did not include any of her Shadow Broker assets or her shared responsibilities with Samantha as the XO of the **Knight Shade**.

As that thought crossed Hannah’s mind, she suddenly realized the reverse was also true and Samantha, may the Gods bless her, had already taken on her share of that load as Liara’s soon-to-be bondmate. She was jarred from her reverie by one of the two people primarily responsible for alleviating Liara’s load as a gravelly voice suddenly shouted out, “Hannah! Good to see you!”

A quickly growing smile on her face, she stepped into the welcoming arms of the latest addition to her family. “It’s great to see you as well, Thyta! And Mozia… It’s certainly under better circumstance than what brought us together the last time we saw one another in person.”

“While that is mostly true, I prefer to focus on the way we parted, after the promotion party, rather than the attempt on Liara’s life, which brought us together earlier than scheduled.” Mozia smiled as she continued, “It is a much more pleasant thought for these times.”

“Seeing as we are all standing here together, to celebrate the upcoming bonding between our two families, I am inclined to agree!” She glanced at her daughter before returning her gaze to Aethyta. “I assume Sha’ira is here as well and we can all get to the business at hand?”

“Wait. What?” Shepard’s eyes nervously traveled back and forth between her mother and Aethyta. “What are you two plotting?”

“Quit being such a worry bug! You’ll know soon enough,” Hannah answered with a laugh.

Sha’ira finally walked in the doorway, an apology ready on her lips, only to be buried under the welcome from Hannah. “Sha’ira! It is so good to finally meet you in person! I have to thank you for all the help you’ve given Samantha and me as we’ve worked through these little details.”

Sha’ira smile and laughed gently, particularly over the expression on the face of the younger Shepard. “I take it you haven’t yet told your daughter anything of our preparations?”

Hannah responded, a sly grin on her face as she stated, “Absolutely not. I wanted it to be a surprise… and since you had a large part in making it happen, you deserved to be here for the big reveal.”

“Looking at her, I assume we need to get to the business at hand before she simply bursts from her overwhelming curiosity.” The Consort gave the Captain a respectful nod. “We are at your command, Spectre. Shall we head to your office?”
“Your mother told me of the wedding poem… and that you needed an item to represent the something old portion for your customs.” Sha’ira paused and smiled as Hannah handed a golden Navy Fleet Marine Force Officer’s Badge to her daughter. “This badge has been passed through three generations of your family. It seemed only fitting that it should be passed to the fourth – you – and that you be allowed to wear it on your formal Spectre uniform at your bonding.”

Hannah met Samantha’s questioning eyes and explained, “Your great-grandfather earned this in 2129 and wore it proudly on his uniform until he was killed in 2134 during a conflict with pirates in the Gulf of Guinea. It was then given to his son, who passed it immediately to David upon his enlistment. I held onto it after your father was killed, hoping for just this chance, waiting to give it to you so that he could, in some small way, be part of your wedding… or, in this case, your bonding… with someone who loves you as much as your father loved me.”

She grinned at the look of surprised awe creeping onto Samantha’s face as she continued, “So, I spoke with Steven Hackett, who thought the whole idea was wonderful and took it before the Defense Committee at his next opportunity. As soon as we received their approval, Sha’ira talked to Councilor Tevos… who then took it to the Galactic Council, who unanimously came to the exact same conclusion.”

A great student of military history, Shepard knew exactly what she held in her hand – the Fleet Marine Force Combat Operations Badge. “This was discontinued in 2149… with the creation of the Systems Alliance Military.” She gave her mother a questioning look. “So… I assume I can wear it for the bonding because it’s no longer an active insignia?”

“No. You can wear it because it is being reactivated for both Naval and Marine officers within the Systems Alliance who belong to a Spectre ground operations team; silver for team members, gold for those who achieve Spectre status.” Tears started to trickle down Hannah’s face as she choked out the rest. “They initially thought the Alliance Spectre insignia should be palladium, but settled for the silver and gold designations in your honor… Specifically so you would be able to wear this particular badge on your uniform every day for the remainder of your service… as a gift from me in remembrance of your father.” She paused and whispered, “Sam, he would have been so proud of you.”

“Mom…” Samantha stopped speaking, the lump in her throat keeping any more words from coming. She sent a quick mental answer to Liara’s query, telling her that all was well as she wrapped the woman before her in her arms, both their faces covered by streaming tears, born of a mixture of both grief and joy.

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T'Soni House Armali, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 9 Aug

Shepard and Liara purposely flew to the city for lunch in the event Tevos had been able to break free sooner than expected and arrived earlier than anticipated. It was not to be, so they were free to eat lunch and spend the afternoon with Aethyta, Mozia and all of the off-duty Armali commandos who happened to wander through. They were sitting on a bench in the meditation portion of the compound when Captain Axoni approached, bearing a long, slender wooden case carved from the wood of a Thessian b’duero tree.

“Lady Liara.” Inordinately formal, Nayla went down to one knee before the couple and dipped her head, holding the case out before her, presenting it for them to take. “The special gift you ordered for Captain Shepard just arrived and I assumed now would be as good a time as any for its delivery.”

Eyes alight with eagerness, Liara reached out and took the case from the Armali Guard Captain.
before Samantha could get her hands on it. “Goddess, yes! It’s perfect timing, but please stand, Nayla!” She laughed in her excitement, holding the case tightly to her as she stood and turned to Shepard. “You too, Captain Shepard!”

The words special gift had certainly caught her attention and Shepard jumped to her feet like a kid at Christmas, a curious smile on her face as she asked, “What’s this, Liara?”

Grinning, Liara placed the case on the bench where they had been sitting and answered, “Your mother handled the something old… and that left the something new, as well as the something blue to me!” Shepard snickered and Liara’s face was flushed as she realized the physical implications of what she had just said as an image of them making love flittered through the link from the Spectre.

“Goddess, Shepard! While that may be true as well, it’s certainly not something I can give you at the bonding!” With her blush deepening in her embarrassment at her own words, Liara managed to undo the latches on the case and continue, “This is something all Asari huntresses have as part of their ceremonial leathers… and something you are lacking, which will be remedied immediately.”

With that, Liara opened the case and pulled out a long, relatively thin object wrapped in a material very much like blue silk. As she unwrapped it, Shepard immediately realized what it was without needing Liara’s explanation, but the Asari stayed the course and finished, “This is a ceremonial Asari Battle Sword, presented only to those of a high house as an indication of their stature among Asari society. This was custom made, with its deep blue scabbard and hilt wrap, as well as its silver belt and sash, to match the colors of your Spectre dress uniform.”

As Shepard stood speechless, Nayla smiled and added, “As primary Captain of the T’Soni House Guard, you are most certainly entitled to this accessory and it is long overdue. I believe it is best that we waited, so it could be crafted in the appropriate colors to match both the T’Soni house colors and your Spectre uniform.”

It was only when they began to cheer that Shepard and Liara realized the commandos had assembled to ring the courtyard while the pair had been focused on the sword. Liara smiled softly and raised the sash over Shepard’s head, placing the sword at the Spectre’s left hip. Her blue eyes came up to meet dancing green orbs, flashing in their excitement as Liara leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss upon ready lips. “Perfect. This will look wonderful with your dress uniform, Spectre Shepard. It suits you.”

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Aletheia, Thessia, At Large – 9 Aug

Shepard, Liara and their commando escorts headed for the city port as soon as they were notified that the diplomatic shuttle had departed the CGC. The shuttle made good time on the short relay jump and, sooner than any of them imagined possible, their newest guests had transferred to the Aletheia, the T’Soni flag ship had received clearance for departure, and they were underway to return to the Estate. Seeing as it was a personal trip, Tevos did not travel with her full entourage, instead bringing only her First, Nizia Tenir, as well as Selina T’Rori, engineer aboard the Destiny Ascension and bondmate to the T’Soni Estate House Steward, Lyessa Raptos.

“I’m sorry Sha’ira isn’t with us, Raesia.” Shepard had a sorrowful expression on her face and while her comment was directed mostly at Tevos, she also glanced at Selina. “I know you two have been apart for quite a while, but Lyessa and Sha’ira are finalizing room assignments, trying to get everything settled before guests… like you… begin arriving.”

“And, apparently, they are about to run out of time.” Tevos laughed softly and continued, “I must
admit I am eager to see her… but it still feels good to simply be off that station and on a real vacation, no matter how short it may be!”

Before she could say more, T’Rori added, “Don’t trouble yourself over it, Spectre.” Glancing at the councilor, she shrugged and continued, “It is a lifestyle for us and we are not unaccustomed to spending significant periods of time apart.” She hesitated for only a moment before shifting her focus to Liara and continuing, “Though, if it please the Lady of the House, I think I am ready to become a permanent member of House T’Soni, in whatever capacity I may serve.”

“Selina!” Liara stared at her in shocked amazement before gathering herself to query, “Are you honestly contemplating leaving the Destiny Ascension?”

“Yes. I have been stationed there now for nearly sixty years and am ready for a change.” Selina smiled softly. “I could request a transfer elsewhere in the Asari Fleet but, honestly? I am ready to end those significant times apart that I spoke of so casually. Besides… Lyessa and I have begun to speak of having children and I would want to be home to help raise them.” Her last words brought a silly grin to her face that, despite her best efforts, she could not contain.

The announcement had Liara leaping from her seat to wrap the surprised engineer in a sisterly embrace. “By the Goddess, that would be wonderful! We will absolutely find you a place in the house…” She pulled back and looked to Shepard, receiving a sense of happiness through the link before she continued, “…and would most certainly anticipate the joyous sound of little feet pattering though the house!”
From Near and Far

Chapter Notes

Notes:

*Anam Cara* - Soul Mate (Gaelic)

Chuffed - Pleased, delighted (British slang)

*Grá mo chroí* - love of my heart (Gaelic)

*Ionúin Álainn* - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

*Maestru* – Teacher (Thessian)

*Mo cheann geallta* - My promised one (Gaelic)

*Nara* - literally “bearer”; one who shoulders another's burden, aids others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

*Siame* - “one who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

*Sim’re* - “sister of my sister”, a dear friend's loved one (Thessian/Source: CDN)

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**T’Soní Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 13 Aug 2188**

The sun had yet to peek through the window to illuminate their bedroom when Livos quietly eased past the door and padded silently to the bedside to wake Shepard, taking care to not disturb Liara in the process. “*Nara*. The first of the Broker ships, *Gurji’s Promise* has arrived; Spectre Bau and Kasumi Goto are downstairs eating breakfast as we speak.”

After blinking her eyes a couple of times in an attempt to clear the sleep from them, Shepard nodded, having expected the early morning wake-up, and leaned over to press a gentle kiss against Liara’s crest before gently slipping her arm from beneath her sleeping lover. Surprising Livos, Shepard slid from beneath the covers to emerge stark naked before the Asari; moving silently to the closet, she quickly drew on a pair of silver-gray sweats and headed for the door. The captain of the Personal Guard followed behind in stunned silence until they exited the room and the door had closed behind them; at that point, she blew out a heavy breath and exclaimed quietly, “By the Goddess, Shepard! When did you suddenly become so… Asari?”

Chuckling, Shepard glanced over her shoulder at the Captain and slowed until Livos drew up beside her. As she picked up her previous pace, Shepard smirked and responded, “What? It’s not like you haven’t seen me strip down in the Armax locker room at the end of every one of our practices. What’s the difference?”

“I… do not know.” Livos shook her head and shrugged, unsure of herself as she answered, “I
suppose it just surprised me and it felt… odd. Perhaps because it was in your private quarters? You are our Captain and I suddenly felt as if I was intruding in your personal space.”

Shepard clapped her gently on the back and answered, “Don’t worry about it, Liv. That’s what I wanted; if you had buzzed my comm, it would have woken Liara as well, and she needs her rest more than I do. Besides, if I was uncomfortable with it, I would have chased you out before I got up. But, that said, I’ll be more sensitive to it next time and give you time to escape if I happen to be sleeping nude.”

Visibly relieved, Livos relaxed and said, “Thank you, Nara. I do not care to be skinned alive by Lady Liara should she feel my seeing you naked… in your bedroom… is inappropriate.” She suddenly laughed as she continued, “Because, if case you have somehow failed to notice, Mistress Liara can be extremely possessive and protective when it comes to you.”

At that, Shepard laughed with her. “Anyone who doesn’t see that deserves to be skinned alive, Livos… me included!”

They could hear a number of people chatting as they stepped around the corner into the kitchen. Of course, Chef Leyana was up and beginning to make breakfast for the early arrivals, as well as Lyessa, who was accompanied by her seldom present bondmate, Selina. Lyessa had an amazing expression of contentment on her face as she busied herself preparing the buffet table while Leyana cooked. It was apparent to Shepard that, while perhaps not here often, Selina knew her way around the Estate kitchen and she aided Lyessa with a practiced ease.

The most distinctive voice of the bunch undoubtedly belonged to Spectre Bau. Shepard smiled at the familiar sound and greeted him first. “Jon. Great to have you here! You too, Kas! How was the trip from the Rim?”

They both answered at the same time, although each reply was quite different. Bau replied quickly, stating simply, “Fine. Nothing significant worth mentioning,” while Kasumi rolled her eyes and said, “Really, Shep? We literally came from the other side of the galaxy, through any number of relays, and yet, we had no time to spare for… acquiring… anything. If you need any quick requisitioning done on the side, please, do tell. Keeping an eye on the rebel Quarians has been beyond dull – at least so far.”

Shepard smiled and answered, “Boring is good in this case. And please, do try to keep it that way, Kas… at least until after my honeymoon?”

“Can do, Shepard.” Kasumi shrugged. “I certainly agree that there’s no sense in poking the evil genius until we know what she and Gerrel are planning.”

“That is a very good idea, Kasumi.” Miranda’s voice rang clearly through the dining area. “It seems we’ve arrived here just in time to prevent our master thief from provoking another war and keeping you from your well-deserved honeymoon, Shepard.”

Instantly, the Captain’s face lit up and she spun around to stride quickly to the newest arrival. “Miri! Gods, it’s good to see you in person for a change, instead of over that vid-screen with what has to be the worst resolution in the galaxy!”

Pulling away from the resultant bear-hug, Miranda was smiling as she responded, “Good to see you, too, Shepard… and I agree. It may be time to think about a few system upgrades. All that aside for now, are you ready for the big day?”

“Absolutely,” Shepard said, with an enormous grin on her face. “Long past due, don’t you think?”
Judea cocked her head and smirked. “All in good time, Captain. Asari normally take time to think things over before jumping in with both feet. For Asari, knowing someone for barely five years is an extremely short promise period before a bonding. Count yourself lucky that Liara is still an impulsive maiden… otherwise, you could plan on waiting another five years or so.”

“In counterpoint…” Hannah added with a smirk, as she walked into the dining area with her first cup of coffee of the morning. “After five years, Humans begin to wonder if a couple is ever going to actually tie the knot. The normal length for our engagements averages only a year.”

“Well, you do have to admit, Mom,” Shepard gave her mother a mock scathing glance as she defended her and Liara’s long timeline, “…we did have rather unique extenuating circumstances. We just happened to be in the middle of the biggest galactic war in known history, so taking a few months off to bond wouldn’t have been exactly prudent, would it?”

As the group laughed with easy camaraderie, Samantha glanced at the coffee in her mother’s hand. “Now, that looks like an excellent idea.” Her eyes shifted to Miranda as she continued, “We have an extensive selection of Terran teas as well… and, I imagine, Leyana is starting to put up items in the breakfast buffet. The commandos will start rolling in within the next ten or so. Anyone besides me hungry?”

Before they managed to get seated, the crew of the Chiroquol also strolled in, Oriana immediately rushing to Miranda’s side. Their entourage included their little rotund friend, Barla Von, and Shepard immediately set her plate on a table and went to him, shaking his hand. “Barla Von. Good to see you. If you haven’t already been informed, much like what we did for the Saint Patrick’s Day party, we have remodeled a few of our rooms with controls that can be set to a great variety of environmental requirements. Today, one just so happens to be configured for a high-pressure, high-gravity, ammonia-based atmosphere. Hopefully, you’ll feel right at home.”

Amidst the intermittent rebreather sounds emitted by his suit, the Broker’s financial wizard replied, “That is most excellent, Captain. I must admit, giving up my independent financial business to be employed by the… House T’Soni… most certainly comes with a number of perks.” He chuckled quietly as he continued, “I do not recall any of my clients ever providing such amenities when I had to travel to conduct business.”

“Well, this is certainly not a business tip… and it’s our pleasure to accommodate you.” Shepard smiled. “You are part of the family now.” She then turned to her longtime Asari sisters, hugging each of them tightly as she uttered quietly, “Ai’a me. It is wonderful to see you both. This reunion has been far too long in coming.”

“But what better occasion than a bonding to bring us all together… young one.” Arlynia chuckled as she used the nickname from when she was Samantha’s biotics instructor.

Shepard simply grinned back and shrugged her shoulders at the comment. “Call me what you will… It’s too good to see you to worry about you teasing me with semantics, Maestru.”

“As it is delightful to see you as well, Sim’re.” Niria took her turn at getting an affectionate hug from the Human. “And where is Lady Liara? Still asleep?”

“Yes,” a nodding Shepard answered. “But I’ll be the first to admit she needs all she can get. I’ve been working on a few things as Spectre but, as the primary, Liara has been working with at least a dozen different matriarchs to make this all happen the way we want it to.”

Niria gave her another hug and pulled back. “We will leave you to your breakfast and get settled into our room. We look forward to spending whatever time we can with you, but do not feel badly if
other things pull you away; we understand the duties placed upon those of a high house, even during what should be a very personal event. We are here for you and Liara, Samantha, not the other way around. We will manage just fine.”

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Over the course of the day, the guest rooms continued to fill with a steady influx of visitors… so many, in fact, that Shepard began to look at her and Liara’s private bonding blessing the next morning as a way to escape the hordes… even if just for a few hours of the morning. With the formal bonding ceremony the very next day following that, they would soon be away on their honeymoon. *Roughly fifty-four hours before we get to escape the madness… but who’s counting?* Shepard immediately felt the wave of apologetic humor sweep through the link and she realized Liara had heard her thoughts.

The Spectre never dreamed that every room in the Estate could ever possibly be occupied, yet it was quickly becoming a reality. The guest wing of the main house contained fifteen deluxe bedrooms, thirty-one suites with anterooms and five captain suites, which included two bedrooms as well as anterooms for either personal attendants or close friends. At capacity, the country residence was able to accommodate up to 184 guests in addition to the staff… and nearly every bed was full for the upcoming bonding.

As the more senior matriarchs began to arrive, Shepard began to feel as though she was constantly on display… and quickly gained a better appreciation for everything Liara must have had to deal with while growing up as the daughter of such an influential matriarch. The captain drew a deep breath and affixed a new smile firmly on her lips before walking into the main reception area to locate Liara. She immediately sought out her *cheann geallta* and whispered in her ear, “Sorry, Love. Didn’t mean for you to hear that snide little comment earlier.”

Liara looped her arm through the one offered by her captain and offered up an entertained smile. “It is perfectly alright, Samantha. Out of necessity, I was forced to deal with it as a child… but I mostly felt very much like you do now and took whatever opportunities I found to rebel when I dared.” Her lips quirked into a smirk that she could not suppress as she added, “Just ask Shiala.”

“Oooohhh. I’ll be sure to do that!” Shepard grinned in response before continuing, “Just so you know, today’s last shuttle from Widow is due into Armali within the hour. Livos will take Sella and Allia to pick up our stragglers… Wrex, Grunt and Garrus and Dee. Even if they’re a little late, they should be here in plenty of time to get ready for dinner.”

“Well… and thank you for the update. I’m looking forward to seeing them all again, as I’m sure their arrival will likely be the best part of the evening.” It was Liara’s turn to draw a deep calming breath. “Are you ready to start the real work? Socializing with all these people we hardly know?”

“Yes, I am,” Shepard nodded, adding quietly, “I’m just glad Miri agreed to come early and give us a voice in our ear. There’s no chance I’d remember the names of all these people.”

“You won’t be expected to,” Liara answered with a sly smile. “You will gain the advantage by putting them off balance when you greet them by name.” Her inner voice carried a hint of humor as she continued through their link. *(I suppose it pays to be bonding to the Shadow Broker, Samantha. You’ll get much more info through that earpiece than just a name.)*

The Spectre turned her head enough to give Liara a glance of understanding before squaring her shoulders in preparation to face the crowd. *(Not knowing them gives me reason to ask the most banal of questions without reproach. I think it may actually make this event easier, as I’ve rarely met someone who didn’t like to talk about themselves.)*
No longer having the excuse of an ongoing galactic war to dodge the social responsibilities that came with bonding into a great house, it was time for Captain Shepard to be seen at the left hand of the new Lady T’Soni, so she spoke aloud, “I suppose it’s time. Shall we?”

“With you on my arm, Siame?” Liara gave her a dazzling smile. “I’m ready to face anything.”

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 14 Aug 2188

The evening had gone well, and Shepard had remained up long after Liara had retired for the night, drinking with Wrex, Grunt and Garrus. Dee had also slipped away, but only after soliciting a promise from Garrus that she not wake in the morning without him in bed beside her. So, while it was a rather rare occasion, Liara woke first and took advantage of the moment, inhaling deeply through her nose and reveling in Samantha's familiar scent. She carefully propped herself up on an elbow and studied the peaceful face of her sleeping lover until she could no longer resist the temptation.

Blue fingers trailed softly up her siame's firm stomach before cupping and gently massaging a voluptuous breast. Shepard groaned softly and her eyelids cracked open, a loving smile appearing on her face as her right arm curled around the blue body tucked against her. Pulling Liara tightly to her side, she pressed warm lips to the Asari's forearm, just above her elbow, before whispering softly, “Good morning, Grá mo chroí. How did you sleep?”

Giddy with joy, Liara answered by tipping her head down and planting a passionate kiss on the woman's lips as she pushed off with her left arm to relocate herself atop the woman she loved so dearly. “Like a dream, my Promised One.” Her body trembled with eagerness as she felt Sam's hands travel across her hips to cup her butt cheeks, giving a little squeeze. In response, she slid her leg over and planted a thigh firmly between Samantha's legs.

Shepard grunted in surprise, the sudden warmth of Liara's thigh pressing against her making her quiver lightly in response. “Uh, uh, uh. No teasing, T'Soni. That will make today's rituals rather uncomfortable.”

“Who's teasing?” Liara's eyes flicked to the chrono hanging on the wall and returned, narrowing with purposeful desire as she purred, “We have forty minutes before the alarm goes off, Siame.” To punctuate her eagerness, a blue hand replaced the thigh, making Samantha gasp.

“Then we'd better get busy, shouldn't we?” Shepard growled with desire as the link opened wide and she dived willingly into the seemingly bottomless obsidian of Liara's eyes, shifting quickly to a meld, overflowing with loving devotion.

Mount Orlael, Armali, Thessia – 14 Aug 2188

Lady Liara T’Soni walked hand-in-hand with Captain Shepard as they eagerly climbed the hill trail at the foothills of Mount Orlael. She was relieved they had chosen to have their formal bonding blessing conducted at the Cave of the Sacred Pools rather than at the rebuilt Temple of Athame in Serrice. After the war, the Council had overseen the relocation of what remained of the beacon to the central repository – where scientists of all races would have access to it – and the Temple had been rebuilt exactly as it had been… right down to the commissioning of a stone-carved statue of Athame to replace the shell that had been used to disguise the beacon.
The last thing either she or Shepard had wanted to happen during their final bonding preparations was to be reminded at every turn of the crushing defeat that had resulting in so many deaths and injuries to the team members who had entered the temple that fateful day. Liara shuddered as the uninvited memory intruded into her mind anyway and trickled without warning through the link; a somewhat surprised and concerned Shepard immediately squeezed her hand and reassured her Ionún Álainn with a steadfast gaze. “Hey. None of that, now. We’re here, we won… and I am about to bond with my Anam Cara. What could possibly be better than that?”

Liara turned her head to look at the stalwart Human beside her; the visage of the precious woman at her side, vibrant and beautiful, made it easy to cast the haunting memory from her mind and allowed a jubilant expression to light up her face, definitely more fitting to the occasion, before she answered, “Absolutely nothing, Siame. Asking for anything more would be an insult to the Goddess… She has provided a promising future for us and, with that, I shall always be content. Such a blessing is more than I could have ever hoped for… yet, here we are.”

Squeezing her hand again, Shepard’s expression turned to one of joyful promise. “Yes, here we are.” Her eyes flicked forward as she continued, “Seriously. I can see the entrance ahead.” A wave of fluttering butterflies took flight in both of their stomachs as they crested the hill, the reality of what was about to happen suddenly as near and irrefutable as the rock cliffs before their eyes.

The priestess awaited them within the cavern entryway, smiling welcomingly as the couple approached, hand in hand. “Lady Liara, Captain Shepard. I assume you are prepared to begin your journey?”

“We are, Priestess Avila,” Liara responded with a grin. “We have waited a long time for this opportunity.”

The priestess nodded. “Time is a friend in that regard. If your relationship has endured for more than a year following the end of the war, that is a good sign. So many fell in love for the wrong reasons, seeking something they felt they would never have because of their fear of death during strife... and, sadly, many did not survive contact with peace.” She looked into the eyes of the couple, saw their steadfast devotion and smiled. “Each of you, however, still possesses that spark… that fire in your eyes.”

“Yes, we do.” Liara paused thoughtfully and decided to add, “And, I assume you have been made aware of our special link... as I believe it to be an important factor in this process.”

When Liara hesitated again, the priestess raised her brow and prodded, “Out with it, my child. If you feel it important, then it must be so... and I have not been given any special information regarding your pairing. So, to that end, please, tell me of this link.”

Drawing a deep, calming breath, Liara breathed out, “We share Inanna.”

“By the Goddess I serve!” Surprised by the declaration, Avila drew a hasty breath. “That is... extraordinary! Combined with your import and fame, why am I performing the ritual... here... and not the High Priestess at the temple in Serrice?”

“Because we had no desire to return there.” Liara frowned, an expression not lost on the priestess who, of course, immediately queried why. Liara continued, explaining, “We went there during the war... to meet with a science team regarding the concealed Prothean beacon. We were there when the temple was nearly destroyed... us along with it.”

An also frowning Shepard quickly added, “Because she leads a high house, Liara already had to explain all this to the High Priestess. I am surprised this information was not passed on so we did not
have to relive those memories on what is supposed to be a special day for us.”

“Of course... you are correct. My apologies, Captain,” the crestfallen priestess answered quickly. Affixing a smile to her face, she continued, “So, we shall discuss it no longer and get on with your ceremony. If you will follow me, please?”

They wove their way into the caverns, moving slowly downward until they came to a division in the tunnel. Avila turned back to them and smiled. “Thus, we begin the process. From here, you will lead. Have no fear… I know these tunnels better than my own soul and we will not get lost. You will, however, eventually find your way to sea-level and a tidal pool that awaits us at the exit to the ocean. I will mark the progress of your journey and provide the appropriate blessing while you bathe in the Sacred Pool; I will cleanse your soul as you cleanse your body.” She stood to the side and indicated they should proceed. “If you have no questions?”

Having been appropriately coached by their mentors, they did not, so accepted the invitation and forged onward. Shepard and Liara enjoyed the cave’s shafts. The entire place was filled with fluorescent rocks and flora, so no external light source was required for their passage through the various tunnels. Both Aethyta and Sha’ira had explained that, to the best of their knowledge, it was an eezo effect limited only to the caves on Thessia. Even rocks taken from the caves and moved elsewhere off-world faded over time as their eezo was depleted, the unique biological makeup of the entire planet refreshing the energy source as no other location could.

Shepard and Liara turned the whole event into a private adventure. Liara had turned to Avila, shortly after they had begun, to ask only one question. “Would you be upset if we purposely choose what we think to be the longest way around?”

“Absolutely not. You would not be the first to do so, as many have done the same, for a variety of reasons. They range from purely wanting to experience as much as one can of the divine beauty of these caverns, as it is likely to be the singular time you ever gain entrance unless you take the vows of a priestess, to very simply wanting to prolong the brief respite from the many demands of relatives, friends, and ceremony that can be so stressful during such times.”

The priestess laughed understandingly as she watched expressions of guilt flicker across both their faces, smiling as she continued, “I see a bit of the latter in you. Rest assured that neither I nor the Goddess would ever think the lesser of you for that. This is an important event in your lives… one that is not to be taken lightly, particularly for those of a Great House. In your own way, you are a servant of the people just as I am… and the Goddess Athame recognizes your compromises for and sacrifices toward the greater good. So, let us continue on our way… and, please, do not carry any burdens of guilt or concern on this day. I am in your service until the conclusion of the formal bonding ceremony on the morrow, so my time is yours to spend as you wish. You are here to enjoy the blessings the Goddess will bestow upon you both over the course of this sanctified event.”

Somewhat relieved, Shepard and Liara continued on their way, hand-in-hand, as they made their way forward. They thoroughly enjoyed the beauty of their surroundings and frequently took turns that led them upward again, instead of down toward the sea, purposely trying to prolong their journey and extend their adventure within the sacred mountain. When they started to hear the surf echoing through the tunnel, they knew they had likely run out of options… and were somewhat saddened when it finally came to pass. They turned one final corner and a grand vista of the Thessian Ocean opened before them, causing them both to gasp at the beautiful sunset before them.

Liara stared in wide-eyed wonder as she sputtered, “I had no idea we had been in here so long!”

As Shepard mumbled something in surprised agreement, Priestess Avila smiled and laughed softly. “I must admit, I believe you somehow managed to find the longest route through the mountain that I
have ever had the pleasure of taking. If that was truly your desire, then the Goddess most definitely smiled upon you as you made your choices! We passed through areas I don’t believe I’ve seen since my initiate days when I had to memorize all the passages.” Her joyful grin instantly told them she wasn’t exaggerating as she continued, “It was invigorating… and a positively glorious trip!”

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**T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 14 Aug 2188**

Owing to a limited amount of time available to be away from their classified assignment, Spectre Ashley Williams had readily accepted Samantha Traynor’s offer to set the vessel down on the parking apron of the T’Soni Estate’s cargo transshipment area, rather than have to shuttle the crew to and from the military docks in Armali. Given her previous posting, Traynor had been given the opportunity to join House Steward Lyessa and Captain Lyria Tremi in welcoming the crew of the Normandy when the frigate arrived – an opportunity which she had immediately accepted.

Having tracked the Normandy’s approach to the planet from the relay, Traynor had arrived twenty minutes before the vessel’s scheduled touchdown. The Estate normally had a dock reserved for VIP arrivals, but it was currently occupied by the *Knight Shade*, so was unavailable. Instead, she had provided Joker and Edi with landing coordinates immediately adjacent to the House T’Soni commando heavy corvettes, *Freedom* and *Liberation*… the latter of which Sammi had seen once before – when a rather angry Matriarch Aethyta had arrived on Earth with a full commando escort, immediately following the attempt on her daughter’s life while they had been in Vancouver.

Given the amount of traffic expected through the Estate over the next few days, the Broker vessels could be nowhere in evidence, so had been parked under the early morning’s cover of darkness in empty, secure warehouses – readily available due to the carefully selected pre-harvest date for the bonding – leaving plenty of room on the parking apron closest to the residence. As she waited, Sammi idly paced back and forth along the walkways in and around the other T’Soni vessels.

Several minutes prior to the ship’s arrival, Traynor was joined by Miranda Lawson, who commented, “It’ll be good to see everyone we used to work with, don’t you think?”

Sammi grinned at the former Cerberus operative as she replied, “It really hasn’t been that long for me, but I do have to agree with you… I’ll be really chuffed to see our former shipmates again.” A flash in the distance caught her attention; shading her eyes with one hand, she looked in the direction she believed would be the ship’s approach vector just in time to see a second flash – the glint of the sun reflecting off the armored hull of a very special ship.

As she watched the slender outline of the frigate, she commented, “Looks as if Joker is actually going to refrain from coming in hot. You suppose Edi is responsible?”

Miranda’s posture was similar to Traynor’s; watching the Normandy’s approach with her eyes shaded by a flattened hand over her brow, she replied, “Maybe, but my guess would be Armali approach control issued a ‘do not exceed’ velocity at such a low altitude. Given the recent pirate attack on the market, it wouldn’t be wise to piss off the authorities right now… Even Judea chose to tread lightly during her approach… and we were cloaked!”

As the ship continued to close on the docks, Miranda advised Sammi, “Better plug your ears, Traynor. Ship’s engines have an ear-splitting whine, no matter how slow it’s traveling.” Having warned her companion, Miri inserted a pair of custom fitted noise-suppressors into her own ears.

Sammi watched with a touch of envy in her expression. *One more thing to add to my list of needed equipment before we set out that I never would have thought of!* She placed her hands on either side of her head and prepared to insert a finger in each ear as the sound from the Normandy’s engines
began to reach their position.

When the ship drew closer and the whining complaints from the four engine pods began to engulf her, she plugged her ears – just as Joker engaged reverse thrust to arrest their forward momentum; the nose came up momentarily as the dockside computer interacted with the ship’s navi-computer to guide the landing gear to a precise touchdown. Traynor dropped her hands as the engines rapidly spooled down to idle; the remainder of the noise quickly diminished away as Edi secured the power converters, leaving only the relatively quiet APU’s running.

The T’Soni Freight Master had a well-trained crew, who immediately hustled forward to connect the ship to ground power. As soon as the external power light lit green on the Bridge, Joker also shut down the APU’s, leaving the parking apron in sudden, welcome quiet. Traynor and Lawson approached the area under the nose where the hanger bay ramp would deploy; as if on cue, the seals unlatched and retracted, followed by the wide ramp slowly tipping down from the hull, accompanied by the whining complaint of the hydraulic pumps.

A pair of armed Marines marched down the ramp first, taking guard positions on either side of the bottom edge. They were followed by Captain – and Spectre – Ashley Williams, who spotted her former shipmates and broke into a huge grin as she moved towards them at a jog. “Lawson! Traynor! Damn if it isn’t good to see both of you!” Ashley grabbed Miranda’s forearms first before grabbing both of Sammi’s arms in greeting as she added, “Ship doesn’t seem the same without you on the comms systems, Traynor. You’ve really been missed. Any chance I could convince you to come back?”

Sammi could feel her cheeks flush as she grinned back at Ashley. “I’ve missed being on the Normandy, Captain, but working alongside Riana, Tali’Zorah, and all the new crew members on the Knight Shade has been absolutely smashing. I’ve been so busy I’ve hardly had any time to simply sit and think. Sorry, but I absolutely love my job here, so I’d have to say no.”

“Can’t blame me for asking.” Ashley nodded as she released Traynor and said, “We’ll be rotating crew members off the ship for the ceremony and party tomorrow, but my schedule is so damned tight, I wasn’t even able to make the detour needed to give Kahlee Sanders a ride in… she should be arriving on a shuttle this afternoon.” After a brief pause, she added, “We’ll have to depart mid-morning, day after tomorrow.”

A movement behind Ashley drew Miranda’s attention; Dr Chakwas had appeared and was walking down the ramp to be greeted enthusiastically by Traynor and Lawson. With a twinkle in her eyes, the normally reserved doctor gave each of Normandy’s former crew members a warm embrace, saying, “It’s so good to see both of you; we’ll be sure to catch up tonight during the pre-bonding reception.” She glanced around, a worried wrinkle crossing her forehead at the obvious lack of someone she had expected to be there to meet the ship.

Miranda immediately picked up on it and smiled. “Hannah is inside putting together Shepard’s dress uniform… while she and Liara are completing their bonding blessing ceremony at Mount Orlael. Their return is later than expected, so Hannah decided to help out by getting Sam’s uniform ready for her.”

Lyria immediately stepped forward. “Doctor Chakwas. I am Lyria Tremi, Estate Guard Captain.” She smiled at the Human doctor about whom she had heard so much. “It would be my honor to escort you to the main house and help you search out Hannah Shepard. I am sure she has simply lost track of time and will be more than happy to see you, sooner rather than later.”

Karin smiled back. “Thank you, Captain… and I am more than happy to take you up on your offer! Please, lead the way.”
Mount Orlael, Armali, Thessia – 14 Aug 2188

Once they had taken in the absolutely stunning view granted them from outside the cave, Liara and Shepard finally noticed the calm tidal pool at the cavern’s seaside entrance, its surface seemingly on fire, burning with the reflection of the Thessian sunset. As they approached the pool, they also noticed the plain white towels and clothing laid out carefully upon the rocks beside it. Having been coached for this, they immediately went to the side of the pool and stood beside its rock entrance steps. The lighting, a combination of the glowing natural rocks and fauna with the colorful sunset, made the entire cavern appear surreal as they began to help each other remove their clothing.

With the sun blazing in the entrance, it was almost hot and, with the exertion of the day’s hike, a dip in the pool would be most welcome, so they immediately signaled to Avila that they were ready to begin. She nodded in confirmation and raised her hands upward as if welcoming the setting sun. “Please descend into the pool, immersing your whole self and then lifting only your head above the water.”

As soon as they returned to the surface of the surprisingly warm pool, Avila began in earnest. “May Athame grant you peace in your future union, that you may never be without the comfort and companionship of the other. Breathe deeply of Athame’s salt and sea; let her renew your body with its natural purity and innocence. Listen to the surf and let it guide you toward the rhythm of the universe. Let the surge and ebb of the waves without lead you to a place within, where the outbound tides can carry your concerns away until you find an inner peace.”

She fell silent as she walked to the edge of the pool and handed them a single sponge. “This is a natural sponge that has been harvested from the sea of Athame’s bounty… exclusively for this ritual. Use it in her glory to cleanse your body. Let the salt of her sea draw toxins from your mind and soul. Let the warmth of her sea ease the aches of your soul as well as your body; let it draw the negativity of daily life from you and ease your burdens. Share, as you must do for a truly successful bonding, and leave not a single patch of skin untouched by her instrument.”

As the couple readied themselves, Avila closed her eyes and chanted, “May your head be cleansed, that you may think clearly. May your throat be cleansed, that you might speak rightly when words are needed. May your heart be cleansed, that you might hear its messages clearly. May your hands be cleansed, that they may create beautiful things. May your feet be cleansed, that they might take you where you most need to be in your service to Athame.”

She watched the couple, pausing briefly between each statement to ensure they both had time to complete the cleansing of the other before she moved on. Once they had completed the last step, she instructed them to rise from the pool and dry each other off, in the same order as having been washed. While they did so, she uttered yet another prayer.

“Negativity of this, our sacred space, I banish you by the light of our Goddess Athame’s grace. You have no hold or power here, thus I stand and face you with no fear, while positive energy alone comes near. Goddess of all, Goddess of light, shield this couple both day and night. Grant them your blessing so they find a happiness that lasts and fills their lives with joy and love.”

As they stood nude before her, Avila dropped her eyes. “Please, walk together to the shore and cast your sponge back into Athame’s sacred waters. Once that is done, return to me.” When they had done so and returned to stand before her, Avila requested they hold hands to form a circle. Their curious gazes made her squeeze their hands, reassuringly, as she spoke once more. “With the circle complete, it is easy to sense you are a blessed couple, repeatedly guided to success even where so many others would meet only failure.”
She paused and drew a deep breath as divine inspiration filled her. “Athame’s desire is for you to continue leading a long life together, full of wonderful adventures which will be guided by your combined wisdom, charity, and love. Your friends and loved ones, often one and the same, will always be precious to you and, while many will pass from this life long before either of you, their fond memories and good deeds will be preserved within your hearts and souls, never to be lost to the annals of obscurity. Let it be known that your very existence is revered by the Goddess and the sanctity of your glorious union will be readily confirmed under the blessings of Athame. Peace and prosperity to you.”

She dropped their hands and instructed, “Please, dress in the provided attire. and I will accompany you to your home for the night. There, you are allowed to socialize with your guests for the evening, during which time I will be available to answer any questions or provide any service of Athame either of you may desire. As the evening comes to a close, I will accompany you to your rooms, where I will bless your bonding attire as you begin your period of self-reflection. You will don no clothing other than what you are currently wearing until the time comes for you to dress for your bonding ceremony in the morning. Are there any questions?”

She looked at both of them, waiting for a negative confirmation from each before allowing a blissful smile to overtake her serious expression. “So, it is done; Goddess be praised! Let us return to the outside world so you may enjoy the evening with your guests!”
Barring a catastrophe occurring after Ashley’s communiqué the previous morning – something that would require Spectre intervention, such as a sudden declaration of war between the rebellious Quarian faction and the SILC of which no one at the Estate was yet aware – Samantha and Liara fully expected the Normandy and her crew to arrive at the Estate sometime in the morning while they were traversing the Cave of the Sacred Pools. However, with the couple’s trip through the caverns having taken so much longer than predicted, the last vessel they expected from the Sol system – Steven Hackett’s diplomatic shuttle – had also made a quick stop to drop off their last remaining personal guests. Upon Shepard and Liara’s delayed homecoming to the Estate, they immediately spied the Normandy sitting on the parking apron but could only surmise the rest of their friends had made the journey successfully and were inside, eagerly awaiting the promised pair’s return from Mount Orlael.

In her excitement to see the latest arrivals, Shepard struggled to maintain a calm, modest pace while escorting Priestess Avila during their walk to the residence. The rousing cheer greeting the small group as she opened the door was all the impetus Samantha needed to bolt forward and wrap a certain woman in her arms, swinging her around in a circle of loving welcome. “Aunt Kay!” The beaming smile on Shepard’s face said it all as she continued, “Gods! I hadn’t heard anything from you this whole past week and was beginning to wonder if you were still going to make it!” Setting the woman back on her feet, Shepard concluded with a dazzling smile, “You have no idea how good it is to see you!”

Kahlee laughed and gave her a playful swat. “What are you talking about? Of course I’m going to be here for your bonding! I wouldn’t miss it for anything!” She turned and smiled, stepping away from Samantha to give Liara a hug. “And it’s good to see you too, Liara. Thank you for taking such good care of our dear Sam.”

Without having to explain what she meant, the concerned yet thankful look on Kahlee’s face told
Liara that the woman most definitely knew of the attack by Sederis and was referring to the subsequent search and rescue. As a result, Liara tried to make light of the incident and smiled as she said, “My pleasure, Kahlee. Shepard has put together quite the Spectre team… She merely wanted to run an unannounced test of our readiness, so went and let herself get kidnapped.” Her eyes shifted to meet those of Shepard, whose green eyes appeared glassy, even if Liara felt it was her own vision that was swimming as she concluded with a forced laugh, “She knew I wouldn’t let her out of this bonding that easy.”

“Well, it seems she found the right partner for the job.” The voice of Sharon Culver came in from the side and had Samantha spinning to greet her as she continued, “How many times have you had to pull her ass out of the fire, T’Soni?”

Shepard clasped forearms with her for only a moment before Sharon drew her into a tight hug as the Spectre answered, “More times than either of us care to count, that’s for sure!”

“God, but it’s damned good to see you, Shep!” Sharon pushed back and looked the woman up and down before adding with an approving smile, “Thessia looks good on you.” She then turned to Liara and offered a hand; as Liara smiled and took it, Sharon laid her other hand atop and wrapped both the Asari’s hands in her own. Pulling Liara a little bit away from the crowd, she stepped close and whispered hoarsely, “Thank you, Liara… for everything. And I’m not just talking about the military shit; that really doesn’t mean a thing. I’m talking about finding her when she was lost… about loving her through thick and thin and always having her back… and protecting her heart. About never giving up on her… even through the hard times… the impossibly difficult times, when you loved her so much it hurt.”

A look of wonder crossed the Asari’s face and Culver nodded. “Oh, yes. I know all about that. You know I was her first lover, Liara, so I know very well how she is… But, that was a long time ago and I’d never think to interfere with the love you two have for one another; what you have is sacred. As much as I love that woman, I know that since you met her, you have loved her more and loved her better than I ever could. She will be my sister-in-arms and my family forever… she has become the sister I never had. Because of that, the bond you have with her makes you family too, so if you ever need anything…” She paused and took a deep breath as she glanced at Shepard before returning a soldier’s gaze to the clear blue eyes of the Asari. “You call me… I’ll be here for you both, as long as I live and breathe.”

Liara leaned forward and wrapped the woman in a tight hug, surprising Sharon with the strength in her arms as the Asari whispered back, “Thank you… Mea’re. Our house is yours and you will always be welcome to stay with us whenever you care to make your way here.”

“Mea’re?” Sharon quirked a brow and Liara, her heart light with the woman’s unexpected proclamation, chuckled softly.

“There is no direct translation, but the term fits you perfectly. It refers to a tribal sister of a loved one.” Liara shrugged casually. “So, you are correct, including by Asari tradition; you are now part of… a special part of… the family of House T’Soni.”

“Thank you, Liara.” Sharon grinned happily and waved a hand in the direction of the crowd. “Now. Don’t let me keep you from the rest of your guests. Hackett’s in there somewhere, as is Lieutenant Colonel Falk… though, I do believe Spectre Williams may have grabbed him and dragged him off somewhere private.”

Returning to Shepard’s side was all Liara needed to do to find the ex-Admiral of the Fleet. The aging soldier had finally opted for retirement from the Alliance but, as predicted, had moved immediately to the position of Military Secretary to the Earth Alliance Prime Minister. As Liara
walked up, Hackett was shrugging his shoulders. “Reuben’s not bad… and he’s certainly not your standard politician. He was born in the colonies and spent forty years in the Alliance Navy… a weapons officer who survived the First Contact War, so he has a bit of a dislike of Turians, but not bad enough to keep him out of politics. He was Anita Goyle’s military consultant for a number of years, until she left office. He then returned home to become the Parliamentary representative for Euler.”

“And now, he’s Prime Minister.” Shepard frowned. “He’s not an isolationist or a LEAP sympathizer because of his attitude toward the Turians, is he?”

“God no, Shepard!” Hackett looked at her with a surprised laugh and a grin as he continued, “You think I’d be working with him if he was?”

“Just checking, Sir.” She answered with a smirk. “I mean… You are going into politics. That’s enough all by itself to make me question if you still have all your faculties about you.”

The two were laughing together as Liara approached them, saying, “Prime Minister Trost is a steadfast conservative…” She smiled and looked at Hackett. “Which likely comes from his years of military service. He was with us regarding a united front in the Reaper War… and remains a staunch supporter of continued joint operations with the other races.”

“And now, Liara is back, so no more business talk, Shepard. Besides, she’s obviously on top of this and can give you a full brief on the poor man. I feel sorry for him if he’s under her scrutiny; he won’t get away with anything.” Hackett reached out and took Liara’s hand. “Good to see you, Doctor, but I won’t take any more of your time on the eve of your bonding. Visit with your other guests and we can speak more during the reception after the ceremony, yes?”

“That would be lovely.” Liara smiled graciously and nodded. “I’ll look forward to catching up.”

After he dipped his head and wandered off, Liara turned to Samantha and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Gabriella and Kenneth would like to speak with us privately, if at all possible.”

“Is everything alright?” Shepard asked the question as she scanned the crowd, trying to locate the relative newlyweds.

“They are still nervous about the idea of a joint reception,” Liara answered. “I think they need to hear us say… in person… that it’s honestly okay with us.”

Wrapping an arm around Liara’s waist, Shepard pulled her close and kissed her on the temple. “Whatever we need to do, T’Soni, as long as I’m with you. Lead the way!”

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The buffet dinner was amazing. Shepard and Liara were touched by the genuine love and affection the people around them held for the bonding couple. It seemed everyone had a personal story – some happy, some sad, but all thankful for Shepard’s and Liara’s actions during the war… and, of more significance to the couple, from the quiet moments… between. As dinner ended, Joker raised his glass, rapping it lightly with the edge of his knife to gain everyone’s attention. He stood and drew a deep breath, looking over the sea of faces suddenly focused solely on him.

“I’m not really one for talking in front of a crowd, but I just have to say that Shepard, with everything going on around us during the war, was always the first up and the last down when something needed doing. Every day, every moment during the war… she always seemed to be there. Asking if things were okay, if we had what we needed to do our jobs, if we were getting the
rest we needed…” He shook his head in amazement and glanced at Liara. “I honestly don’t know how she did it… except by the grace of the lovely Liara T’Soni, who stood faithfully at her side through it all, never giving up or giving in. There is no couple in the galaxy more deserving of this time to simply kick back, get bonded and have one Hell of a honeymoon! To Shepard and T’Soni!”

As people started to break away and head to their rooms for the night, Kahlee first sought out Hannah then, together, they went to speak to Samantha. Kahlee had an odd expression on her face that Shepard was unable to put a name to. “Mom? Aunt Kay? Everything okay?” As she asked the question, Samantha reached out, searching for Liara’s hand.

Sensing the disquiet rippling through the link, the Asari stepped closer and intertwined her fingers with Shepard’s. “I sincerely hope nothing has happened.” Her brow wrinkled with concern, the sensations emanating from her siame making her also feel unsettled.

“Oh, God no!” Kahlee’s eyes were red and she smiled as she wiped away the beginning of a tear from the corner of her eye. “It’s just that I have been speaking with your mother, Sam… And she informed me that the badge she had thought to serve both as something old and something borrowed turned into a part of your uniform you’re going to keep.” She paused as she reached into a large pocket in her dinner jacket, her hand emerging with a small, wrapped package which she opened slowly, continuing, “They aren’t all spit and polish like the new ones you currently have on your dress uniform, but I thought you might like to have them on your shoulders during your bonding. They belonged to David.”

It took a moment for Shepard to realize what Kahlee was offering her, and the instant she did, tears began to stream down Sam’s cheeks. She reached out with a shaky hand and picked up one of the epaulets, turning it in her hand as she whispered, more to herself than any of the people at her side, “These were Uncle Dave’s dress stripes.” Her eyes came up to meet the silver-blue orbs of the woman before her. “I would be honored to wear them, Aunt Kay.” She choked on her next words and had to cough to clear her throat before continuing, “It’s still hard for me to accept that he’s gone… that I couldn’t have done something… anything…”

“You stop that right now, Samantha. We all know there was absolutely nothing you could have done at that point to stop that… lunatic. And I also know David would have given his life willingly, if it meant that we would win the war and that you would live to see another day.” Kay’s voice picked up more than a hint of wistfulness as she went on, “This was what he always wanted for you… To find someone special and fall in love… and to enjoy the incredible happiness that comes along with such a relationship. The best way you can honor his memory is to bond with Liara and live your life to the fullest. To make his sacrifice mean something. You hear me?”

Liara felt Shepard’s heart swell with affection and gratitude. After her father had died, David Anderson had become a key figure in Samantha’s life… He had filled many roles; mentor, father figure, teacher, friend. Relief flooded through Liara as Shepard’s head and heart acquiesced and willingly accepted what Kahlee had just told her. Samantha drew a deep breath and coughed before quietly answering, “Yes, Ma’am.”

Shepard then picked up the second epaulet and paired them together, clutching them to her chest for a brief moment before wrapping Sanders in an affectionate embrace. “Thank you, Aunt Kay. I know these must mean a lot to you, so I’ll make sure they get back to you after the bonding. I love you.”

Fresh tears appeared in Kahlee’s eyes. “I love you too, Samantha. Now, you wear those with pride tomorrow… for the angel that will be sitting on your shoulder.” She huffed and wiped away the tears. “I only wish he could have been here in the flesh to see it.”
As they pushed back, Shepard had a sad smile on her face. “Me too, Aunt Kay. Me too.” She reached back, knowing Liara was still there and would again seek out her hand. As the hand of her *cheann geallta* made contact and she interlaced their fingers together, Samantha sighed quietly and added with a smile, “We’ll see you in the morning.”

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T’Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 15 Aug 2188

The Estate had a rather expansive central garden courtyard, exclusively for large, special gatherings such as this, so it was the obvious choice as the location for the bonding, which needed space for nearly 250 seats. Now, Shepard and Liara stood at the entrance and looked down a long, white pathway flanked on each side by an expanse of green grass… with rows upon rows of white chairs for all their guests. At the far end, they could see the relatively small stage adorned with three-meter marble columns, topped with flowers and draped with billowing fabric so sheer it appeared as blue smoke blowing in the light breeze around the pillars.

The time had come for Samantha’s and Liara’s long-awaited union to become official; they had promised themselves to one another long ago, the announcement of which had been blessed by Liara’s father, Aethyta, swiftly and without hesitation. Now, all the preliminaries were complete – so, the final vows would be spoken and the activated bonding bracelets placed upon their wrists. Neither Liara nor Shepard could keep from smiling as the ceremony for which they had waited so long finally began.

Shepard was arrayed in her Spectre dress uniform; while quite similar in style to her Alliance dress uniform, the jacket’s color was Spectre silver and her trousers were a deep midnight blue, so dark they appeared black to an observer’s casual glance. Her new Asari blade hung at her hip, the gold Fleet Marine Badge adorned her left chest, and her sparkling new rank had been replaced by the battle-worn captain’s insignia given to her by Kahlee. She stood tall, a beaming smile on her face as she crooked her elbow, inviting the Asari to begin their walk to the stage.

Liara smiled at the memory of the first time Shepard had modeled this particular uniform for her, when they had attended the Victory Day Anniversary Ball. ‘You cut quite the dashing figure in that outfit, Samantha... and you say it is customary for officers to wear their dress uniform at Human weddings? You absolutely must wear this for our bonding!’

She had seen the start of a smile on the face of her Promised One that had only grown with her final statement. Upon hearing Liara’s request, the Spectre had simply finished fastening the topmost clasp of her jacket and grinned, relieved that her *Iomúin Álainn* did not expect her to wear a gown. ‘If that's what you want, Liara, I am more than happy to accommodate your choice for my attire.’ The woman had paused long enough to place a warm, loving kiss on the Asari’s cheek before continuing, ‘You'll simply need to procure a dress to coordinate with it.’

Liara had clapped in childish glee and thanked Shepard for indulging her, knowing a silver bonding gown with midnight blue piping had been included in Sha’ira’s collection... the Consort was obviously aware of the tradition and was well aware of what the uniform looked like. All the memories, both good and bad, passed through Liara’s mind in mere moments as Priestess Avila saw them and smiled as they arrive at the entry.

Upon the diminutive stage, she raised her hands, palms up at shoulder height, and began. “Under the grace and wisdom of Athame, please rise for the entry of our beloved couple, Lady Liara T’Soni and Spectre Samantha Shepard.” Standing there, she patiently waited as they completed the lengthy entrance walk. Once they made their way forward, the pair knelt quickly onto a soft pad provided for the occasion.
The Priestess gently laid a hand upon each of their heads as she began. “As the Tides have been for centuries, the Tides shall always be. As the tide of your Love has grown, the tide of your Love shall always be strong, forever lapping at the universe's shores of Eternity. You have spoken these words in promise... a promise to now be fulfilled by each with the bonding vow.”

The Priestess of Athame smiled at the young couple before her and reached out, taking a hand from each of them in her own and placing them together. Her hands remained upon theirs as she spoke. “Both Lady Liara T'Soni and Captain Samantha Shepard have willingly offered their hearts, minds, and souls to this sacred union. As is custom, they walked the paths to the Sacred Pools only yesterday… and received a blessing of Athame for long lives filled with wisdom, charity, and love.”

The Priestess quickly drew their bracelets from a pocket in her robes, holding them before the bonding couple as she prompted them to take their chosen symbols of unity from her. “Please, take the appropriate bracelet and place it on your Promised One’s wrist.”

As they carefully snapped the circlets around each other’s wrists, Avila clasped their hands once more, both to activate the bracelets and to ensure they did not forget to stay in constant physical contact until the end of the ceremony. “With the blessing of your union by the Goddess Athame...” The Priestess' hands glowed with biotics and the bracelets, as she was touching them both at the same time, activated simultaneously, a soft glow surrounding them. She then pulled away, leaving Liara’s and Samantha’s hands intertwined before her, and the glow surrounding the bracelets expanded to encompass the couple, now fully surrounded by an aura of biotic power. Smiling, Avila added, “It is time, now, to speak your vows of unity.”

Liara's glistening blue eyes moved from the Priestess to her beloved as she started to speak; Shepard tumbled into Liara's eyes, lost for a moment in the unbridled passion and adoration she found there. She had to close her eyes and break the connection for an instant to get the words in her mind to make their way to her lips. Liara paused and smiled understandingly at her siame, passing calming vibes via the link as she waited patiently for the scattered thoughts racing through Samantha’s mind to coalesce into coherent speech.

Finally managing to begin the well-rehearsed performance, the two lovers peered adoringly into each other’s eyes as they spoke in unison, “We are two souls, two minds, travelling down life's path. We have been blessed with the opportunity to be closer than most. I ask that you allow me to travel with you as I ask you to travel with me; be my guide as I shall be yours. Let us not be two but one reflection of each other; one mind, two souls, moving ever closer, never to part. Mind, body, soul, joined, two acting as one.”

Once they finished the vow, they closed their eyes and leaned their foreheads together, entering a full meld, which would cement their union and complete the link between the bonding bracelets. As they did so, Priestess Avila spoke softly, “Thus, the bond is begun in earnest. These bracelets demonstrate the circle of life, the infinite love and commitment each participant holds for the other, the physical as well as the spiritual blending of two souls into a joined presence, together for eternity.”

Her biotics gradually diminished, only to be replaced by power emanating from Liara and Samantha. Once the newly joined couple dropped their biotics and opened their eyes, they smiled up at her to indicate they had completed their union. Priestess Avila smiled down on them, directing them to regain their feet and turn to face their guests. “Your bracelets, like your souls, will remain forever linked now that your bonding meld is complete. Rejoice in the full blessings of Athame which have been bestowed upon your unification.”

She smiled happily as she addressed the crowd. “Please, join me in welcoming the newest member
of House T'Soni… Captain Samantha Shepard… as she is united under the many blessings of the Goddess Athame to Lady Liara T'Soni. May the two truly become one, unto perpetuity, until their eternal souls leave the corporeal realm to rise amongst the stars and their essential essence returns to the universe.”

Priestess Avila’s smile transformed into a mirthful laugh and the crowd erupted with shouts of jubilation as the couple turned to one another for a surprisingly passionate kiss before turning and making their way to join up with Ken and Gabby Donnelly. Together, the foursome made their way to the reception hall for the follow-on celebration.

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It had been a long, introspective couple of days. With a scrumptious dinner in their bellies, followed by many hours of drinking and dancing, Shepard and Liara had finally retreated from their guests to the private deck outside the master suite. They sat quietly in the dual lounger, each with a glass of Elasa in their outer hands while their inner arms were linked, both leaning into the other's shoulder. Liara stared intently up into the night sky and Shepard caught a trace of wistful longing through the link.

“What's the matter, Liara?” She smiled softly. “You missing the Normandy... knowing it's no longer our ship?” Shepard's serenity faltered as a name slipped inadvertently across the link. “And who the heck is Alec Ryder?”

Startled by the sudden tinge of... wariness... in Shepard's voice, Liara turned quickly and kissed her bondmate’s cheek. “No one in any competition with you, Samantha.” She let out a quiet sigh. “He is a man from my past... from 2183. An ex-Alliance N7 who asked me first for my help and then, eventually, to go with their expedition... to Andromeda.”

“What?” Shepard's brow furrowed in confusion. “Andromeda? How did I not know the Andromeda Initiative asked you to go with them?” Shepard's doubts had instantly turned to relieved surprise as Liara’s conviction surged through the link. The repentant Spectre, suddenly having a better grasp on the many sacrifices Liara had made for her, stated, “And you declined… because of me.”

Liara's eyes and forehead scrunched together as her grip on Shepard's arm tightened. “Of course I did! You had been lost... and there wasn't a chance in the galaxy I was going to abandon you!” She shook her head in denial. “They originally wanted you as well, both of us to travel aboard the Asari Ark, the Leusinia. But, like everyone else, Alec knew about the destruction of the Normandy; his message of invitation was... kind... but I declined, claiming I was still chasing the Protheans.” She set her glass down and turned toward Shepard as she continued, “But, in reality, I was chasing you, determined to discover your true fate...” She paused as a tear ran down her cheek. Making no attempt to wipe it away, she continued in a voice mixing melancholy and happiness. “I couldn't bear to leave without knowing... and will be forever grateful that I chose to stay.”

Samantha set her Elasa down as well to free her hand to gently caress the Asari's face. Shepard tilted forward to kiss her Iomúin Álainn deeply, her profound gratitude and infinite devotion to Liara pouring through the link. Their lips separated but they remained leaning into each other as Shepard whispered quietly, “Me too, else we wouldn't have this.”

Liara smiled and pulled away, wiping the tears off her cheeks and retrieving her glass of Elasa. She held it up between them, waiting for Shepard to do the same before toasting, “To our future. Our lives ahead… full of happiness and little blue children.”

Shepard chuckled softly as their glasses clinked together. “I can most certainly drink to that!”
They sat together, finishing their Elasa and watching Thessia's moon rise full and bright over the ocean, promising light for their future, even in the darkest of nights. When their glasses were empty, Shepard rose slowly from her chair and extended a hand in invitation, her thoughts moving through the link making Liara blush lightly as the Asari took her hand and stood to join her bondmate. They slipped in through the doors, slowly and lovingly undressing each other as they went, leaving a trail of clothing behind as they made their way to the bed.

Liara placed a kiss of promise on her Human’s lips just before pushing Samantha backwards onto the bed. Shepard smirked as she wiggled higher up and commented, “Awfully pushy tonight, T'Soni. What do you have in mind?”

Liara raised a brow marking, responding in a sultry voice, “Oh, you’ll find out soon enough, Captain,” as she climbed onto the foot of the bed and leaned forward, planting a kiss on the inside of Shepard’s raised left knee.

With that, Shepard drew a deep breath and leaned back on her elbows, a loving smile on a face filled with anticipation as Liara began to glow with a hint of biotics. Warm blue lips traveled teasingly up Samantha’s inner thigh and their eyes met as eager lips encircled an awaiting bud. Sucking once… twice… before a tongue swept through folds just beginning to hint at moisture.

Shepard groaned and closed her eyes, dropping her head back as Liara’s hands slid up her sides, followed by her whole body, her tongue and lips trailing licks and kisses as the Asari worked her way up until their lips met once more. “I love you, Siame… Bondmate.”

Shepard’s face held her trademark lopsided grin as she echoed back words whispered to her, seemingly so long ago. “Show me.”

With a husky laugh, Liara whispered, “Count on it,” before wrapping her lover in a tight embrace. Kisses feathered across the freckles of Samantha’s cheek before meeting eager lips, further fanning the flames of passion. Liara’s left hand fondled a right breast before teasing the tip into a hard peak… just as her right hand slipped down into her lover’s moist folds.

Sam’s heart swelled, an overwhelming sense of loving devotion darting into her soul as she breathed in Liara’s enticing scent. Finding the aroma both intoxicating and exhilarating, Shepard put her own hands to work with warm, affectionate fingers slipping carefully into the sensitive folds of Liara’s lower back. The Asari’s rhythm was momentarily interrupted as she gasped in surprise at the sudden surge of pleasure flooding through her system.

The bridge between them was unobstructed; the link as open as it could be without morphing into a meld, purposely held in check – at least for now – desiring only to enjoy the physical pleasures two people very much in love could each call forth from their partner. Liara felt every caress across her pebbled skin… as did Shepard in return… like electricity coursing through their veins. Their bodies trembled wildly in response to each other’s touch, the synapses in their minds firing in a frenzy of sexual ecstasy under the rapture of their spiritual union until they felt the beginnings of truly uncontrollable heat blossoming in their loins. Meld!

They came together, both emotionally and physically, as the world around them disappeared into blackness, tumbling dizzily into a state of Inanna and gasping to catch their breath as they returned to themselves, only to find they were drifting amongst the stars. No words were needed as each embraced the other… at the same time withdrawing from the meld until they once again felt the sheets beneath their sweat-chilled skin.

“By the Goddess, Siame,” Liara whispered before pausing to draw breath, her heart still hammering from the exertion. “That was magnificent.” They both started to giggle, tiredly, as they snuggled...
together in each other’s arms.

“Agreed,” Samantha responded, reaching down to draw a cover over them as a shiver ran down her back. “A side effect of the bonding, you think?”

“I don’t know,” yawned Liara, followed by another, quieter giggle. “Perhaps… but it could also be simply two people very much in love, celebrating a special day?”

Shepard flopped onto her back and drew a deep breath, releasing it slowly in an attempt to slow her still racing heart. She beamed as her Anam Cara took the opportunity to once again snuggle into her favorite nook; Liara’s eyes threatened to close and her thoughts coming through the link lost clarity as her mind started to muddle with sleep. Shepard gave her a quick squeeze and answered, “I suppose you have plenty of solid evidence to make that argument, but it doesn’t really matter… Besides, both of us are obviously too tired to discuss it now, anyway.”

In her exhaustion, Liara didn’t respond other than to hum in agreement and place a warm, soft kiss on Samantha’s neck. A sense of contentment filling their souls, they closed their eyes and drifted away into peaceful slumber, knowing they would be departing on their honeymoon the next morning.

T’Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 16 Aug 2188

The summer morning dawned, clear and cool with an onshore breeze – a deservedly magnificent day to start the next phase of their joint life. Shepard woke first, the warmth of Liara tucked into her side being something the woman instinctively knew she would never cease to appreciate nor take for granted as the heat of her bondmate’s breath softly caressed her chest with its even rhythm. She closed her eyes again and allowed herself to be consumed by the ever-present link between them. She was surprised when she discovered she could immerse herself into the Asari far enough to feel Liara’s heart beat, slow and steady with sleep, as if it were her own… even lacking the meld.

Liara stirred, her subconscious sensing the welcome intrusion and she smiled in her sleep as their inner selves merged into one… She awoke as they both came to the same, sudden realization – This is the bond!

As her eyes fluttered open in surprise, she found herself peering into green orbs alive with curiosity… and awe. As she breathed deep and drew in the reassuring scents of leather and musk, Liara was suddenly very aware of Shepard’s loving touch already stroking her soul and body from within and, along with something so amazingly primal as the sense of smell, her body instantly grew warm with the sensations and memories that came along with it. The unexpected combination of the various stimuli as she emerged from sleep awoke a deep sexual desire over which she had little control.

Shepard felt the echo of lust in her chest and whispered softly in invitation, “Good morning, Grá mo chroí.” In response, Liara pushed herself up and covered her Human like a blanket, one hand cupping the back of Samantha’s head as she kissed her, tongues battling for position until they had to break apart to breathe.

Liara rested her forehead against Samantha’s and whispered in return, “Good morning to you, too, Siame.” She paused and raised her head to study the face below her; the woman’s intense green eyes were a focal point that had the greatest draw, but Liara couldn’t stop herself from also appreciating the lightly tanned, yet pale, skin… with the adorable scatter of freckles similar to her own, the wonderfully crafted, luscious lips she so loved to kiss, and the sea of silken auburn hair
splayed on the pillow that framed the whole picture. “I will never tire of looking into your eyes, Samantha. May the Goddess’ blessing of a long, loving life be one we can truly enjoy… as one.”

Shepard picked her head up far enough to place a soft kiss on the willing lips hovering above her before responding, “Yes… and, it seems, ‘as one’ has definitely picked up an expanded meaning. This morning makes me wonder, again, about last night.” Her lopsided grin made itself known as she continued, “Is it my imagination, or is our link somehow… enhanced?”

Somewhat distracted from her goal by Shepard’s question, Liara slid to the side to rest on the bed instead of atop Samantha. It freed her one hand to gently caress the woman’s face as she answered, “Oh, it is most definitely deeper. I woke with your soul entangled in mine… as if you had initiated a meld, but I never believed such a thing possible.”

As Liara’s brow wrinkled in thought, Shepard asked, “Do you think this is something we need to speak with Sha’ira about?”

“No,” her Anam Cara answered quickly. “As a matter of fact, I don’t want to tell anyone anything about this at all.” A quirky grin took over her lips as Liara continued, “It can be a little secret that just belongs to us…” Her eyes narrowed a bit as she asked, “Does that sound petty? That I would want at least a small piece of our relationship to be ours, and ours alone?”

“Absolutely not, Blue.” Shepard kissed her. “And with so much of our lives being public… me being a Spectre, you leading a High House… I find I rather enjoy the idea of something, however small, being held back for just us to enjoy and explore on our own.”

Liara’s eyes shined brightly and she cast a beaming smile at Sam as she said, “Me, too!” Her expression suddenly grew very serious as she continued, “There is, however, something about your morning’s foray that we do need to discuss.”

Instantly concerned, despite Liara’s seemingly calm statement, Shepard reached up and stroke the cheek of her Ionúin Álainn. “I’m sorry. Did I do something I shouldn’t have?”

“No.” A smile teased at the corners of the Asari’s lips as she focused on her desire. She saw understanding blossom on her bondmate’s face as she concluded, “But you cannot possibly think you can leave me in this condition for any length of time, Siame, without serious repercussions.”

Laughing, Shepard peered up into the impish expression on the face of her Anam Cara. “Something tells me that discussion is the last thing on your mind, Doctor.”
When the couple finally emerged from their suite it was well into mid-morning; they knew it was time for most of their guests – particularly the crew of the Normandy – to be on their way. Knowing that some time might pass before they had an opportunity to see their friends again in person, neither Shepard nor Liara wanted to miss their chance to bid everyone farewell; of greater importance, they wanted to express their gratitude to everyone for coming.

So, even though it was technically the first day of their honeymoon, they had set an alarm and requested a staff wake-up in the event they didn’t appear before people were ready to leave. Following an untold number of hugs, handshakes – and a few kisses for extra-special people – the Normandy crew had gradually trickled out the doorway and across the parking apron to their ship, leaving only her captain and the ship’s doctor still to board.

Shepard smiled as Ashley gripped her forearms. “Take care of the Normandy and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, Spectre Williams… and try to save a little action for me and the crew aboard the Knight Shade. I’m certainly not ready for the Council to retire me from combat… at least not completely, anyway.”

“No worries about that, Skipper.” Ashley’s face held an easy grin as she released the arms of her fellow Spectre and mentor. “I wouldn’t think of going to war without you on my six; at least not intentionally.” Williams turned to Liara and stepped over, giving her a warm embrace. “Take care of yourselves and have a grand time these next few weeks… I don’t want to receive any calls for help from either one of you. As for us, we have Kas and Bau heading back to the Rim to continue assisting us in monitoring the situation, and Miranda’s told me she and Oriana have everything covered on the Brokerage side of things; so, there’ll be no need for either of you to be thinking about work. All the problems we’re monitoring will still be here when you get back.”

Taking a couple of steps back, she added, “And thanks again for including Gabby and Ken in your reception. With dark-out protocols in place due to our mission, there really wasn’t much we could
do on the Normandy; they deserved to enjoy a real party like last night. It’s just a shame I have to boot Gabby off at the CGC.”

Liara smiled. “It truly was our pleasure, Ashley. Our only regret is that between the Quarians and our honeymoon, we don’t have more time to spend with you and the crew. We miss all of you… tremendously.”

“Yeah, well.” Ash smiled in return as she responded, “Even if we are on opposite sides of the galaxy, it’s still better than it was during the Victory Tour. At least you guys are celebrating your bonding and the Normandy is doing her job again, instead of having to endure galactic politics.” She looked over her shoulder at a certain doctor waiting a few paces away. “Sooo… I’m not in that much of a hurry; take your time saying goodbye to Karin. I think this is hitting her harder than she’s willing to admit… knowing we’re headed out and you two honestly aren’t reboarding the Normandy to come with us… ever.”

Shepard glanced past her friend at Chakwas and smiled. “Thanks, Ash. You take care out there… and I’ll send the good doctor on her way shortly. The longer the goodbye, the harder it is to actually say it.”

As Ashley turned and walked slowly away, Shepard followed in trail, stopping once she reached the woman in question. “Aunt Karin.”

The woman looked up and met Samantha’s eyes for only a moment before looking away and wiping her own eyes. “Look at me, being a sentimental old fool. I had to realize you wouldn’t stay on the Normandy forever… but this all just seems so damned… final.”

“Hey, there’s nothing final about this.” Shepard wrapped her arms around her dear friend and held her close. “We want you to know that you are always more than welcome here, anytime you’re ready for a break… even when that break is permanent and you’re looking for someplace to retire. We’d love to have you here with us, Aunt Karin… and I hope to see you, along with Mom, at least on all the major holidays… assuming, of course, the ops tempo agrees and you have leave time available.”

Karin sniffled and laughed at the same time. “Thanks to that damned war, I have more accrued leave time than I could ever think about using… so I’ll keep that in mind, Sam.” She finally wrapped her arms around the younger Shepard and squeezed tight before stepping back, a tearful smile on her face. “You two take care of each other, and don’t become strangers. I know it’s not as convenient as an elevator ride down to deck three, but I expect to hear from you on a regular basis, you hear me?”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Shepard grinned and snapped a salute. “I told Ash that I wouldn’t keep you too long; the Normandy has a schedule to keep.” She reached out and gently took the older woman’s hands in her own. “I love you, Aunt Karin. Be careful out there… please.” She heaved a heavy sigh. “I’ll be honest with you… I’m a bit worried by just how unpredictable Xen and Gerrel are; the whole situation on the Rim concerns me greatly, for more reasons than one.”

“Gerrel in particular.” Karin’s eyes flashed in unbridled anger. “I would not look kindly upon him putting any more of my crew… my friends… at risk, like he did during the war. I will never forgive him for causing Bethany Westmoreland’s death. If anything happens, Hippocratic Oath or not, I’ll kill the wanker myself!”

Shepard looked her in the eye as she answered, “You won’t have to, Aunt Karin, because I promise you… I will beat you to it.”
Once the Normandy had departed, Shepard and Liara sat down for an early lunch with their remaining guests so they could send the Sol System folks on their way with full bellies. The tables still had a sizeable crowd, even with the entire crew of the Normandy now gone. Once lunch was done, Hackett, Sanders, Culver, and Falk were the next to leave. Their shuttle was still visible in the distance when the shuttle from the CGC – a larger version of the diplomatic shuttle departing the planet – rapidly approached and descended to land in the same parking slot so recently vacated by the Alliance shuttle.

“Thanks again for loaning Sha’ira to us, Rae.” Shepard smiled warmly as she faced the councilor and clasped her hand, raising it to her lips to softly kiss her knuckles. “I don’t know what we would have done without her immense patience to temper Aethyta’s gruffness.”

Tevos drew the woman in for a quick hug. “I would say it was my pleasure… but I would be lying.” She laughed at the surprise evident on Samantha’s face as she added, “Well, just a little. I would never begrudge your need of her services, Samantha… not in the least; that said, I certainly did miss her… tremendously, so am extremely happy to have her returning back home with me.”

Liara released Sha’ira from a loving hug and turned to Tevos to embrace her as well, saying, “Yes. Thank you! She was a savior during the ritual memorizations. There is no doubt in my mind that we never would have made it through the entire process so quickly without her help.”

Sha’ira smiled softly and dipped her head to the young leader of House T’Soni. “It is my pleasure to serve, Liara, but we did have an entire month to spare in the event you and Shepard had not proven to be such apt students.” Glancing between the two bondmates, she continued, “I know you will enjoy the retreat center but, please, if there is anything amiss upon your arrival that is not immediately remedied, do not hesitate to contact me… I will ensure it is taken care of promptly.”

“I’m certain everything will be fine, Sha’ira.” Shepard waved her hand dismissively. “If not, we’ll handle it. Your gift to us is extraordinary… so we will not impose on you any further. We certainly don’t want to interrupt your homecoming to the CGC.” She grinned as she looked at Tevos and continued, “Last thing I want to do is turn my strongest proponent on the council against me!”

Tevos laughed softly and smiled, “There is very little chance of that happening, Shepard, as you have many more friends than me on the council now. Your position as a Spectre is undoubtedly secure for many years to come.”

While they were chatting, Liara had turned to Engineer T’Rori. “Selina. It was very good to see you, as well… especially given your news! When do you anticipate leaving the Destiny Ascension to return home to us full time?”

“Thank you for being so welcoming, Lady Liara. As for your question, I will submit my sixty-day notice upon my return, so they have time to bring in a replacement from the Fleet…” Selina offered a timid grin and continued, “So, I anticipate returning here sometime in mid-October… I hope that is acceptable?”

Liara laughed and clasped her hands. “Oh! Absolutely! My only regret is I have no idea where the Knight Shade will be by then, so we may not be home to greet you. But, do not let that trouble you; you are welcome here and I am confident that either Lyessa or Lyria will have a permanent position in mind, long before you actually arrive home.”

Bashful or not, Selina couldn’t quell the robust laugh that originated from deep within her. As she regained her composure, she apologized, “I am sorry, my Lady… but you are more correct than you
realize. Within two hours of hearing about my planned departure from the Destiny Ascension, Captain Tremi informed me I would be assigned to the maintenance division of the T’Soni fleet… where my focus will be on engineering maintenance, upgrades and testing for our heavy corvettes, *Liberation* and *Freedom*, as well as the flagship, the *Aletheia*.”

Shepard slid over and wrapped her arm around Liara’s waist, giving her a quick squeeze. “That sounds like an excellent assignment for you, Selina! We’ll most certainly look forward to having you here. However, the shuttle pilot is starting to make noise about her schedule and returning late to the CGC, so we have to let you all go, whether we are ready and willing or not.” She released her bondmate to turn to the last guest preparing to board the Council Shuttle – her mom.

Hannah, who had enjoyed getting to know the entire staff over her full two weeks with the T’Soni household, looked at her daughter and forced a smile onto her face. “You know how much I hate goodbyes, so I’ll make this quick. Assuming you are home for Christmas, I will see you for Alban Arthan, because Karin and I both plan on coming, if possible. Otherwise, we’ll simply figure out some other time to visit… that said, I do promise it won’t be horribly long before we see you again… especially me. I am just a shuttle hop away, after all.”

“I love you, Mom… so, of course, I’ll look forward to anytime we can manage to be in the same spot at the same time.” Samantha drew her mother into a long embrace and continued in a soft voice, “And, even though I doubt she’d come, we’d love for you to bring Aunt Kay along for the ride.”

Hannah pushed back and smiled at her daughter. “What a great idea! I’ll do that, Kiddo.” She quickly walked toward the doorway, where Tevos, Sha’ira, Nizia and Selina all waited for her to join them before heading out the door to their awaiting shuttle.

The door to the residence had barely closed behind their departing guests before Shepard was accosted by a rather boisterous Krogan. Picking her up and nearly crushing the life from her in a powerful hug, Grunt practically shouted, “It was good to see you again, Battle Master! Keep me informed on how Commander Jatok does. He gives you any trouble or lets you down, you let me know and I’ll send someone to fix the problem, no matter what it is.”

Wrex simply chuckled, “What he said, Shepard. Been good to see you and Liara. Maybe you can find your way to Tuchanka, so you can see Bakara and little Eve. She’s growing faster than a Varren pup and pretty soon you won’t recognize her.” He looked her in the eye and growled, “You’re my Krantt… You’re not allowed to make her forget what you look like by staying away too long.”

“You’ve got it, Wrex.” Shepard clasped forearms with the big Krogan as she finished her farewell. “We’ll make a point of stopping in to see how the rebuilding is going.” She then turned to Grunt. “As for you, I definitely want to head out to Garvug and see what you’ve done with the place… particularly Dhazil. I trust your reports, but I still want to see it for myself.”

“Heh, heh, heh.” Grunt offered up his signature laugh with a toothy grin. “Happy to show you around, Shepard. Maybe even accept a little help on a couple of the strongholds we’ve yet to crack.” He turned his grin to the Asari at Shepard’s side as he continued, “And make sure to bring Liara along. You’re good… but the two of you together are downright scary… even to Krogan!”

“Don’t worry, Grunt. If Shepard’s there, I won’t be far away.” Liara reached out and laid a gentle hand, glowing with biotics, on his chest. “And I’ll be sure to have the full arsenal available when we arrive.”

“Thanks, Liara.” He chuckled again. “They do say the best presents come in tiny packages.”
The last remaining guests were Garrus and Desis, who had the luxury of time. After Shepard and Liara departed, Estate Team 2 would be heading to Palaven to pick up a restock of dextro-based foodstuffs that had somehow not successfully made it into the last planetary supply shipment. With the Knight Shade having four dextro-dependent crew, they had gone through their on-hand supplies at the Estate faster than anticipated and would be departing before the next monthly shipment arrived on Thessia. Since the team were headed in that direction anyway, they offered the couple a return trip to Palaven aboard the VIP-1. It was hard to turn down a ride on such a richly appointed transport... especially one that offered door-to-door service with a drop-off directly on the rooftop landing pad of their apartment building.

As such, Shepard and Liara had packed up and were ready to leave before they had to say their final farewells. Garrus started out all business. “I’ll be looking into the screw-up concerning the Thessia food shipment, Shepard. We’ve had some issues with piracy, which makes me wonder if the freighter carrying the dextro foods got hijacked.” Subharmonics adding an unfriendly emphasis to his words, he continued, “If it was, I have a pretty good idea who may be behind it... and I think our upcoming conflict with the pirates may have an effect on your conflict with two certain rebel Quarians.”

Liara’s eyes widened in surprise. “Garrus? What makes you say that?”

He chuckled, “Nice try, T'Soni, but I’m already speaking with Miranda about some intel I’ve received... and my theories. You two are going on your honeymoon and I’m hoping we’ll have this sorted out before you get back... though a two-week deadline might be a bit tight.”

Desis flared her fringe in irritation as she turned to glare at the big Turian. “Don’t be a Žvanil! You’ve gone and said too much already... and now, Liara’s just going to worry about it until she knows what's going on! They're leaving on their honeymoon, Garrus!”

Chastised, Garrus cast an apologetic look at his companion before looking back at Liara. “Well, shit; may as well just lay it all out for you then. I’m reasonably sure the shipments are being intercepted by Quarian raiding parties... for one thing, all their liveships are accounted for; secondly, the Heavy Fleet must be getting pretty desperate for food after all this time. If it’s not the Quarians, it’s most likely someone that’s profiteering off their clandestine need for supplies.”

“So, they’ll get it however they can to keep from starving to death... and with their new stealth technology... they could very well be conducting the raids themselves.” Liara shook her head and looked at Shepard. “We promised each other this two weeks would be ours... and I’m going to stick to that promise, Sam. We’d have to find the proof we need before we can take any action, anyway, so we simply have to trust our Broker teams to do the job without us.”

“And, we’ll have Riana with us so, if something significant comes up that we absolutely need to act on, she’ll tell us... Right?” Shepard raised a brow in question.

“She will definitely not like it, but if we tell her to do so, then yes, she will tell us.” Liara sighed in resignation.

Shepard looked back at Garrus. “So, that’s the solution; you guys figure it out. If something comes up, it will take time to work up an action plan anyway...” She paused and pointed at Garrus. “But... if it all comes together faster than you expect? Well, you’re a superb tactician, Garrus, and I totally trust Ash and the crew of the Normandy. Just do what you need to do. Simple as that.” Samantha reached over and took her bondmate’s hand. “I also made a promise and, like Liara, I intend to keep it. We are going on our honeymoon as planned.”
Desis elbowed Garrus in the ribs and answered for him, “As well you should. You two deserve every minute of personal time you can get!” Her silver-flecked violet eyes bore into the blue-grey eyes of the Turian beside her. “Don’t they?”

“Yes!” Garrus nodded emphatically. “Absolutely! We’ll handle it should anything break open sooner than expected… and the galaxy will still be in one piece when you get back. I promise!”

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The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 16 Aug 2188

The Aletheia remained cloaked as they entered atmosphere coming into Sanves. They were a significant distance from Sanves’ capital of Etheai and, once they had cleared the planetary defense control point with the codes provided by Sha’ira, they were directed to specific entry coordinates where there would be no traffic control region other than the one operated by the resort center for incoming and departing clients. Their arrival was a timed window and, even though cloaked, a repeating message with their specific identification code was being broadcast. It provided very specific approach and landing instructions, including elevations and speeds to ensure no undesired contact or interference with other clients currently staying within other areas of the resort.

The Aletheia’s new pilot, Lusmeni Thoni, expertly settled the ship onto the designated landing pad; as soon as the ship settled on its landing gear, a dome immediately rose around the vessel, concealing it from view by any other flights that may pass above. As Captain Tanni opened the hatch and the full commando team disembarked, a lone Asari emerged from a small building at the side of the parking apron and quickly approached them with a large luggage cart and a contented smile on her face. “Welcome to the Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort. I am Acolyte Selana and will be your point of contact for the duration of your stay. Please, place your belongings on the cart and I will show you to your quarters.”

Once Shepard and Liara joined them and they had all the bags loaded, Selana directed them to the small building from which she had come; this proved to be nothing more than the ground-level access for an elevator that dropped them down to a subterranean tram network. “Please note the shuttle address on the wall, Area 23; this is your designated parking apron number as well as your residence code.” She then pointed to the wall of the tram they had stepped into. “Every shuttle within the resort contains an interactive map.” She pressed a keycard to the dot on the map that indicated the residential area and the vehicle began to move.

“Záhrada S’Vatyne provides all the amenities of a standard resort… along with any level of privacy you desire. We will proceed directly to your private complex, which contains a variety of entertainment options within but, should you desire to depart your complex to venture over to the lake or any other area designated as ‘public,’ your privacy is forfeit, as is the privacy of any other guests who may have chosen to go there. All we ask is that you conduct yourselves in a respectful and considerate manner as you would at any other resort. You are welcome to engage with other guests at any public location within the resort but, as a security measure, we must insist that under no circumstances are you to bring anyone back to your private complex without prior consent of the resort staff.”

As their car glided to a stop, Selana declared, “We have arrived at the residence selected for you by your sponsor, Consort Sha’ira. Please, follow me.” She led them up a relatively short ramp, emerging gradually at ground level of a stunningly beautiful courtyard. “You have a variety of amenities – a pool, a biotic target range, a meditation garden and a library reading room to name a few.” She smiled and continued, “There is much more, but discovery is part of the fun, is it not?”

They made their way past the pool and into the main house, entering via a full kitchen. “While the
kitchen is stocked with the basics, the resort does have a variety of restaurants, each of which also has a delivery service, should you desire. I am unsure if Sha’ira informed you, but your sponsorship by a fully accredited Consort allows you to access resort amenities at the ‘all inclusive’ level… An exceedingly rare gift for an obviously exceptional couple.”

Selana’s last words were the first indication she had any idea who the people were that she was showing around the place. Liara’s insatiable curiosity finally won out and she asked, “So… you have yet to use our names, but you do know who we are?”

The acolyte’s laugh was full of mirth. “But, of course, Lady Liara. Even though Sha’ira gave us only those details necessary to ensure the selected complex was the best fit for you, I doubt anyone here would fail to recognize you… either of you. But fear not; your presence here will not be advertised in any way, so if you remain within your complex, you shall not be bothered by anyone. As an added bonus, the ‘all inclusive’ amenities also include privately guided tours through any part of the resort, such as wilderness safaris, guided trail hikes… or a private dinner cruise on the lake, to name only a few of your options.”

She walked over to a small, corner desk. “Here, you have access to outside communications… which are routed through a communications scrambler to hide the call’s location of origin. This console also provides a search capability of the entire list of entertainment options available to you. It has been preset to full access in preparation for your arrival.”

“One last thing.” Selana entered a code and opened an administrative window on the console. “I need to register each of you to this residence. I have a bypass card that I am issued so I can come and go to this location as necessary, but for you to do so, I need a biometric scan of your hand.” She pulled out a scanning plate. “Please, as I call your name, place your hand on the plate and leave it until the indicator goes green.”

Once they had all completed their registration, Shepard looked around the small group and grinned before focusing back on Selana. “It all sounds great… only question I have is, should we decide to do something outside the complex… Do we need to notify you before we step out?”

The acolyte smiled. “Absolutely not. You are free to move wherever and whenever the shuttle system allows you to go. Just remember, should it block access to a location, try it a second time by leaving your hand on the screen for a duration of at least five seconds, as it may be an event or area restricted from guests with a lower authorization level. Also, should, any of you choose to take one of the special tours, please contact me through this communications protocol.” She raised her omnitool and keyed in a sequence, broadcasting it to everyone in the party. “I will help you make the necessary arrangements, for whatever it is you wish to do. I am your facilitator for all things Záhrada S’Vatyne and am available at any hour of the day or night to make your stay the best it can possibly be.”

Selana smiled. “So, let me see… console registration, unlimited access, resort directory… Oh, Goddess! Your living quarters!” She laughed cheerily and started to walk away. “Please, come this way and I’ll show you to your individual rooms!”

Obviously, Liara and Shepard had a master suite with an anteroom, the latter of which Riana immediately claimed by tossing her bag down on the bed. The suite itself was magnificent, including a private bath and a small indoor garden with a sunken jetted tub in the middle. The rest of the rooms, while smaller, were similarly appointed, minus the private garden. Shepard had asked if all the complexes were as large, to which Selana had answered to the affirmative.

“You have to realize, Captain, the primary customers here are Consorts. Each frequently has their own security team and at least two or more acolytes. The last time someone of Sha’ira’s renown
stayed here, they came with two security teams and six acolytes.” She saw the expression on Shepard’s face and continued, “Yes; she came with eighteen… yet she came alone.” She sighed sadly before whispering conspiratorially, “I recognize the importance of what they do, but I do not understand the how or why. I cannot imagine the loneliness such a life must bring along with it… holding the secrets of the galaxy in your mind and never being able to fully share yourself with anyone because of it. It would be too much of a sacrifice for me to bear. I would never consider beginning the training for such a service; being a simple acolyte is demanding enough.”

Shepard looked at Liara and squeezed the blue hand that seemed to have been almost constantly connected to hers since they had disembarked from the Aletheia. “Every profession has its benefits and its sacrifices, Selana. It’s simply a matter of weighing your personal priorities that determines how you select your own path.”

Selana stared at the woman in silence for a long moment before responding, “You sound very much like a Consort, Captain Shepard, and I believe it extremely likely you have sacrificed more than any of us outside of your crew could ever know. I can see why Consort Sha’ira holds you in such high regard.” She shook herself and continued, “I… apologize. You are easy to talk to, but I have no business speaking of such things. I am sorry if I have offended you.”

“No.” Shepard smiled and shook her head. “No offense taken… and, while you have no wish to become a Consort, I can see why you chose to be an acolyte. I get the distinct impression you’re a sensitive.”

Selana closed her eyes and dipped her head. “You are most observant, Captain. The majority of those employed here who interact directly with our clients hold such a specialty. It helps us understand your true desires… even those which people are generally unwilling to speak of aloud, for any number of reasons.”

Liara drew a deep breath and chimed in, “Well, you need not concern yourself with that here. We are exactly as we appear; recently bonded and ready to relax for two weeks without the demands of my house or of the Galactic Council.”

Selana offered a quick nod. “In that case, I shall depart so you are free to begin your quest, Lady Liara. Again… if there is anything at all you desire, please do not hesitate to call me. I am solely at your disposal for the duration of your stay.”

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Once Selana was out the door, the group went their separate ways, each to their own room to unpack and get settled in for the duration of their stay. Shepard was hanging her last few things in the closet when Liara stepped up behind her, gently running her hands over the Spectre’s well-developed shoulders. “Samantha? Do you have any thoughts on what you’d like to do for our first night here?”

The captain pivoted around slowly and placed her hands on Liara’s hips, pulling her close and placing a gentle, yet sensuous, kiss on soft, blue lips. “Hadn’t thought that far ahead… even if it is… like… now,” she whispered, then chuckled lightly. “I’m actually kind of tired of all the people and the pomp and ceremony, Li. I do believe I would be most content if we simply stayed in and relaxed, Blue. Is that okay with you?”

“Unquestionably, yes.” Liara smiled softly and returned the kiss. “I was thinking the same thing… with a slight twist.” As Shepard quirked an eyebrow in question, Liara leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, “I wish all the commandos would go out for the evening and leave us by ourselves. I would love for you and me to cook dinner together, just the two of us. I too am done with all the
fancy meals we’ve had since our guests began arriving – so, you and I cook and eat… in private… followed by a glass of Elasa in that delightful garden jetted tub.”

“I’m with you so far, T’Soni.” Shepard ran her hands gently up Liara’s sides and slid them past her shoulders to her throat before continuing up to cradle Liara’s face. After placing another tender kiss on her Ionuín Álainn’s lips, she extended her arms, simply resting them atop the Asari’s shoulders as she queried, “After that?”

“After that, I have absolutely no idea.” Liara shrugged lightly and huffed, “I am simply… tired, Sam. I think what I honestly want to do then is just cuddle up with you and get a good night’s sleep. We can have the follow-on discussion… for what comes next… tomorrow morning, or whenever we wake up and can actually think past the next five or ten minutes.”

Laughing quietly, Samantha drew the Asari close and wrapped her gently in her arms, kissing her on the temple. “That, my dear Anam Cara, sounds like a wonderful plan… except for one little hitch; we can’t send all the commandos away… That would be against the new House security rules.” She pushed back a bit and ran the backs of her fingertips caressingly down Liara’s cheek. “So, let’s discuss it with Livos and see if we can reach a compromise.”

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It was a relatively short period of time later when Captain Livos Tanni and three of the T’Soni commandos – Iryna, Sella and Allia – were on their way to the restaurant sector. Chosen for first watch, Lieutenant Tra’ana Iremi, Riana, Lusmeni, and Sellis stayed behind but, in deference to Lady Liara’s wishes, set up outside by the pool, merely as a safeguard should anything happen. Their proximity would also mean they would be available as escorts should the newly bonded couple within change their minds and decide to go out.

As long as the couple stayed put, each of the private complexes was surrounded by a protective shield, designed primarily to protect the visitors from the potentially dangerous animals that lived in the surrounding tracks of untamed forest. The strength of the shield, however, also allowed it to serve a secondary purpose of protecting against intrusion of all kinds – including those of the mercenary or pirate varieties.

Inside the house, Liara and Shepard were otherwise engaged and gave little thought to what was happening outside as they dug around in the pantry and decided on a very simple meal of koto ke’ah with a cream sauce and a side salad. Liara’s idea of them cooking together made Shepard extremely happy. While Samantha was the one actually doing the cooking, Liara prepared the salad and then stood at Sam’s back; she had started with light, teasing massages… but was now simply standing there, leaning against the woman with her arms wrapped around her Siame’s waist, humming softly in contentment.

“Hmmmm. You’re warm.” Liara said softly. “And you smell good.”

Samantha glanced over her shoulder at her and chuckled, “Don’t know why… other than I have an Asari blanket and I’m cooking dinner.” She grinned and continued, “Probably as good an explanation as any for both of your observances.” A pair of warm lips brushing the back of her neck at the hairline sent a shiver down Samantha’s spine and she jokingly added, “I thought you were tired.”

“I am,” Liara laughed. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate you being here and us being together, does it?” Her hands settled on her siame’s hips before sliding slowly up the woman’s sides. “You have a wonderful body, Samantha; very strong… yet cuddly and warm. You always manage to make me feel safe when I’m with you, without even trying, I might add.”
Shepard set down the spoon she was holding, shut off the cooktop and turned to her Ionúin Álainn. She wrapped an arm around Liara’s waist and pulled her around to stand beside her before placing a quick kiss on the Asari’s cheek and turning back to the stove. Picking up the spoon and a set of tongs, she gently folded the ke’ah into the buttery cream sauce as she very matter-of-factly stated, “That’s because you know we make a rather formidable team, so you are safe with me, Liara. Always. Except maybe when I’m cooking. Your kotopollo is a bit different than my chicken, so I hope I don’t end up poisoning us.” Laughing, she added, “Do me a favor and grab the plates; it’s time to eat.”

After Shepard placed a piece of crusted kotopollo and a healthy serving of ke’ah on each plate, they sat down at the eating bar; Shepard watched as Liara scrutinized her plate. “I will admit, I have never seen koto ke’ah prepared this way.” She put a small, tentative bite into her mouth and her eyes lit with wonder. “Goddess, Shepard! This is delicious!”

“It’s a variation of a Human dish called chicken alfredo.” Shepard smiled. “I’m glad you like it because, as you witnessed, it was fairly easy to make, using readily available Asari ingredients.”

Liara closed her eyes and rolled the flavors around in her mouth before swallowing with a sigh of contentment. “This really is good. You had better be careful, Captain, or I’m going to assign you to the kitchens with Chef Leyana.” Liara’s voice carried a teasing lilt and her eyes twinkled impishly, making Shepard laugh.

“I highly doubt the Council would release me to join the House T’Soni cooking staff.”

“I love that sound, Sam.” Liara set her fork down and looked lovingly at her siame. “To hear you laugh so freely… It is a balm to my soul and warms my heart.” Reaching over to take the woman’s hand, Liara continued, “But I can’t help but feel a little guilty… when so many are still in need following the war… about us spending this time so frivolously.”

“Liara.” Shepard spoke her bondmate’s name softly, with only the slightest hint of rebuke in her tone. “We have sacrificed so much getting to this point in our lives. I died – twice! I feel no guilt whatsoever in sitting back for two weeks and taking this time to celebrate our bonding.” She smiled and squeezed Liara’s hand as she continued, “And you shouldn’t either. We need this time… You may think it foolishness and folly to be doing this, but it’s the best way I know to rest a tired soul.” She paused before asking, “When was the last time you honestly took a vacation… one that wasn’t dictated to you as a mandatory medical rest period? One of your own choosing that lasted more than a weekend?”

“I don’t…” Liara stopped almost as soon as she had begun. “It was when we defeated Sovereign and we visited your mother and then came to Thessia.”

“That was not entirely a vacation.” Shepard’s voice was even, but her tone still carried a bit of a bite, unable to keep her mind from remembering what happened shortly after that visit to Thessia. “That was a mandatory downtime while the Normandy was being repaired… Yes, I had the chance to introduce you to my mother but, on Thessia, I was introduced as House T’Soni’s new Captain, worked with your commandos to upgrade their weapons, armor and the House defensive systems… all while we mourned the loss of thirteen members of House T’Soni. We got through it, but it wasn’t exactly fun.”

“You are correct… it was not all fun… but we did get through it.” Liara squeezed her hand and smiled. “And I most certainly remember how that vacation ended with a certain dashing Lieutenant Commander asking for a Promise Vow from me.” Liara leaned over and placed a chaste kiss on Samantha’s cheek before adding, “One which I most joyfully granted.”
Samantha turned her head to meet the Asari’s lips for a kiss that made Liara’s heart race. As they separated, Shepard whispered softly, “Okay. I’ll give you that one…” Her mind skipped over the two years she missed as Cerberus worked to rebuild her and continued, “… but it’s been five years since then! We were at war for the first four years of that and then, without a break, tossed directly into that damned Victory Tour… which was, in its own way, nearly as bad as the war itself! I say it’s about time we took a break. Consider it selfish or not, I don’t care… because we deserve it, Liara. I firmly believe we deserve every bit of personal time we can steal to finally sit back and enjoy our hard-sought victory. Don’t you agree?”

Liara looked at her for a moment, her expression gradually shifting to a playful smirk before she finally answered, “You are absolutely correct, Samantha.” Her smirk faded to obscurity as she continued, “I suppose I’m feeling unnecessarily culpable for everything bad that is still going on. So, while it’s a stretch to think the galaxy would ever leave us alone for more than just a brief period, we can most certainly do our best to ignore the outside world for a bit and, like you said, relish in whatever time we can steal.” She leaned in again for another quick kiss before finishing, “With that said, let’s finish up dinner… and let our carefree follies begin!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It is likely I will not have a chapter ready for next week. Sorry to skip, but I have to travel for a 3-day conference for work, so won’t have time to write. I know… great sadness and I’m sorry to disappoint. But, no worries, I’ll be working on the next whenever I can and get it published on the earliest possible Friday!
Separate Worlds

Chapter Notes

Shmex warning! All bets are off after Liara drags Shepard to the bedroom! (Lasts until the next line break.)

Amantía - lover (Thessian)

Anam Cara - Soul Mate (Gaelic)

Grá mo chroí - love of my heart (Gaelic)

Ionúin Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Siame - “one who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Tá tú mo gach rud - You are my everything (Gaelic)

XO - Executive Officer

The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 16 Aug 2188

Liara handed Samantha the two crystal snifters of Elasa and slipped down into the inviting water of the hot tub, only to reach up and take them back so Shepard could follow suit. Immediately handing one back to her bondmate, Liara closed her eyes and leaned back, relaxing into the molded seat as the gentle warmth penetrated to her very core. “By the Goddess, this feels delightful.” She smiled as a hand lovingly stroked the side of her thigh, from knee to hip and back again.

“Open your eyes, Blue. The garden is beautiful under the light of the moon.”

Liara did so, but temporarily passed on the garden view to observe Samantha; the expression on the face of her bondmate was the very definition of utter serenity and peacefulness, relaying a mood of tranquility to the Asari as her siame took a sip of Elasa and tipped her head back to lean against the headrest, savoring the smooth liquor. Shepard’s focus was on the multitude of plants on all sides of the spa. She suddenly pointed and quietly exclaimed, “Look at that red flower, Li! The color is amazingly vibrant… like it’s ready to jump off the petals!”

Shepard’s observation was interrupted by a quiet giggle at her side, making her turn to look at her Ionúin Álainn. She was met by a soft, loving smile and half-closed eyelids… but neither trait engaged the Human’s attention nearly as much as the sense of adoration suddenly enveloping her, its consuming intensity lifting her spirits like nothing else could. Temporarily struck speechless, Shepard could only grin happily in response to the giggle that carried such tender devotion along with it.

“You were right, Sam. It really has been a long time since I’ve felt free enough to do absolutely nothing… and I must admit, now that I have begun to simply let go, it feels positively amazing. Even just sitting back to watch you enjoy life – like your laugh earlier – makes me feel… I don’t
know… free? Comfortable? Content?” Liara blinked and opened her eyes normally as she sat up, her suddenly intense, crystal blue eyes gazing into the green orbs of the woman before her.

Leaning closer, Liara’s lips softly tickled those of Samantha as she whispered, “Alive. You make me feel free to honestly live… with hope for a real future.” Her words were immediately followed by an enthusiastic kiss that, with its unexpected hunger, nearly made the Captain drop her snifter into the water as the sensation of unwavering adoration swept through her mind.

“Wow,” was the only thing Shepard croaked as she recovered her breath. Clearing her throat, she finally managed to utter, “I love you too, Blue. Tá tú mo gach rud. ”

“And you, mine, Siame.” Her eyes shifted in the direction Shepard had been pointing and she was about to ask which flower, when one seemingly jumped out of the foliage surrounding it. “Goddess, you are correct… that is an amazingly brilliant red! I believe it must have a hint of bioluminescence to make it appear so bright.” Liara’s soul soared as a wave of pleasure swelled within her, the sensation leaving her nerve endings tingling in anticipation.

In response to the unspoken request, Shepard placed what little remained of her Elasa on the tiled patio at the edge of the tub and reached out to wrap her fingers around the back of the Asari’s neck, whispering as she pulled her in. “I marvel at the sense of wonder and curiosity you have for the world around you when you lower your guard, Blue… That’s the innocent archaeologist I so fell in love with when we first met.” She kissed Liara softly, slowly, until their lungs began to ache for oxygen.

Parting slightly, they sat in silence with their foreheads touching, greedily drawing air together. As their oxygen-starved lungs recovered, they sank deeper into their link and the meld simply… ensued… their heartbeats and breathing slowly synchronizing until it was difficult for either to distinguish one from the other. The passage of time lost all meaning as they sat in quiet solitude, simply enjoying their intimate connection until their quiet reverie was interrupted by the cessation of the jets within the tub.

Shepard smiled and softly whispered, “I guess our time is up. Ready to go in?”

“No, but I suppose we should.” Liara leaned back and picked up her glass, downing what little remained in one gulp. “Besides… I’m changing my answer to yes. I am ready to go in… to start that cuddling I was speaking of earlier.”

Shepard grinned while finishing off her own Elasa before answering, “Sounds good to me.”

They stood up and climbed out of the sunken spa tub, Shepard handing Liara one of the towels they had carried out with them. She then surprised her Ionúin Álainn, beginning to dry the Asari with the towel she had kept; Samantha’s tender, loving care brought immense joy to Liara’s heart with her gentle, soothing strokes. She then draped the extra-large, plushy towel around her bondmate and drew her in for an affectionate embrace.

As Shepard reached to take the dry towel back from the Asari, Liara smirked. “Oh, no you don’t; it’s my turn to repay the favor.” She first squeezed the bottom edge of Samantha’s hair in the towel to keep it from dripping down her back before carefully wrapping the towel around the Human’s body; pulling Sam into a tight embrace, she lovingly ran her hands across the surface of the towel… effectively patting Shepard’s torso dry before moving the towel to dry the woman’s muscular arms and legs.

Several intermittent kisses accompanied the process and they were giggling happily at each other by the time they were dried sufficiently to leave the garden area and enter the main house. With the heat
of the summer and the humidity of the indoor garden, the refreshing chill of the tiles against their feet provided wonderful cooling relief as they padded across the floor to the master suite, where they simply dropped their wet towels into the refresher on their way to the shower.

After rinsing the residue of the spa’s slightly salty water from their bodies, they once again dried each other off – with many more little kisses and nibbles – before finishing their nightly routines and sliding eagerly between the silken sheets of the bed. As she spread out flat on her back, Shepard groaned, “You’ll never get me out of this bed, Blue. It’s way too soft and comfortable.”

“Ha! You will be bored to death within ten minutes of waking and be up and about within a minute or two after that.” Liara smiled and aimed a kiss at the woman’s cheek, only to be met by a pair of lush, warm lips.

The kiss ended quickly as Shepard laughingly replied, “That depends largely on if you’re still sleeping or if you wake with me; if you’re awake, I can guarantee you that I will most definitely not be bored.”

“If you wake up at your usual time of six in the morning…” Liara’s right brow marking cocked in warning, knowing very well she wouldn’t be awake that early unless she was purposely awakened by her bondmate. “… I can, with the utmost confidence, say you had better be bored, Samantha Shepard.”

Another playful laugh preceded Shepard rolling up and over to sit astraddle Liara, pinning her to the bed beneath her. A calmness settled into her soul as she smiled lovingly down upon the face of her Ionúín Álainn, observing in appreciative silence the serenity and contentment she saw in the Asari’s expression. The soft, loving devotion in the blue eyes gazing back at her silently beckoned Samantha down; without a word she fell – rather eagerly, at that – into the suddenly obsidian abyss of those same eyes. *So much for being too tired to do anything this evening.*

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**Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large – 17 Aug 2188**

It had taken Petty Officer First Class Sheldon Dubow more time than he would have liked to learn most of the ins-and-outs of the comms position on the Normandy. As Ashley Williams’ chosen successor for Specialist Samantha Traynor, he knew he had some rather large shoes to fill and was doing his best to learn everything about his new position on the legendary ship while also searching for anything and everything concerning the break-away Quarian admirals, Han’Gerrel vas Neema and Daro’Xen vas Moreh, along with the combined fleets forced to accompany them.

After arriving at the Tassrah System’s Mass Relay in the Phoenix Massing, the Normandy had returned to its search location in the Chomos System, nearly twenty-five hours after leaving Thessia on the 16th. Upon receiving verification from Kasumi Goto that *Gurji’s Promise* was also safely in system, Spectre Williams tasked Specialist Dubow with passively searching for the *Neema* and *Moreh*. Even with the search capabilities of *Gurji’s Promise* added to Normandy’s efforts, Ashley knew it would likely take several days of intense searching before Dubow and Kas could confirm the locations for all the ships in the Quarian Heavy Fleet; searching for the smaller research vessels commanded by Daro’Xen might take even more time, but Williams was following her hunch that Xen’s ships would not be too far from their better armed protectors.

Information from Len’Dazza’s report to Spectre Shepard that the *Neema* and *Moreh* were parked on Sidacha led Ashley to begin the search there; in less than four hours, Dubow sent a comm to his captain in the War Room: “I have found both of the Quarian vessels, Ma’am; they are located fifteen klicks apart near a range of mountains at the moon’s southern pole. The short-range galaxy map
“Good job, Specialist. Proceed with your expanded search of the other moons.” Williams stepped into the QEC chamber, where she sent an encrypted, voice-only message to the Gurji’s Promise, providing Kas and Bau the locations of the rogue admirals’ ships on Sidacha. “We’re looking at the other moons. Have you located anything in the ring debris field?”

Kasumi’s smile was apparent in her voice as she responded, “Transmitting the locations of nearly two dozen small-to-medium-sized vessels hiding among the larger fragments of debris closest to Bestia. Their captains have to keep engines powered in order to maneuver – a lot of the bigger chunks around the ships are constantly shifting, presenting a distinct danger to the smaller ships hiding among them – making it easier for us to track their heat emissions.”

“Great work, Kas. Continue your search and, please, keep us posted with whatever you find.” Ashley terminated the connection, stood back from the situation display, and rubbed her face with both hands before sending Kas and Bau’s results to the galaxy map in the CIC. After receiving an acknowledging ping from the automated display, she secured her terminal and strode purposefully to the security checkpoint, only to come to a screeching halt as she arrived at the two body scanners. She silently cursed the delay, crossing her arms and tapping her foot with impatience until the machines completed the scan cycle, the indicator flashed green, and she was finally allowed to continue on to the CIC. After receiving an acknowledging ping from the automated display, she secured her terminal and strode purposefully to the security checkpoint, only to come to a screeching halt as she arrived at the two body scanners. She silently cursed the delay, crossing her arms and tapping her foot with impatience until the machines completed the scan cycle, the indicator flashed green, and she was finally allowed to continue on to the CIC. Making a mental note to ask Edi about disabling the annoying scanners once the Normandy’s hatches were secure and they were underway, she walked quickly toward the Galaxy Map, glancing at Specialist Dubow as she passed behind him to mount the control pedestal. “I just updated the display with the most current results from Spectre Bau and Agent Goto.”

Dubow waved a hand at the display as he replied, “Noted, Ma’am. I have also discovered and plotted more ships belonging to their heavy fleet. In addition to the flagship, I’ve located three additional cruisers, along with five other ships… either light cruisers or heavy destroyers, depending on how many cannons they have and how well armored they are… both of which are impossible to determine with only passive scanning, particularly at this distance.” He paused, then asked, “I assumed you did not want to begin active scanning to answer those questions?”

“Absolutely not, Specialist,” Ashley chuckled. “Good call.”

He flashed her a quick smile and continued, “I’ve assigned color codes to each ship we’ve discovered, Ma’am: Red for cruisers, orange for light cruisers and yellow for what the computer believes to be destroyers. The blue dots signify lighter craft, such as frigates and corvettes.”

“Those results indicate you haven’t uncovered all of them. Is that an accurate assumption?” Williams turned her head and cocked an eyebrow in question.

The specialist’s expression was grim as he responded, “Unknown at this time, Ma’am, but I’d venture an educated guess there are additional destroyers and frigates still to discover hidden on or around Norem… not to mention the one question nobody wants to know the answer to.” He paused and drew a deep breath before asking, “Where in Hell are their carriers?”

“Damn; I was afraid you were gonna say that… and that’s gonna be a problem.” Ashley shook her head in disgust as she studied the preliminary results of their search. Gerrel’s got a Hell of a lot of firepower here. If that fucker actually begins an attack, I certainly can’t bank on the Normandy’s Spectre status meaning shit… which means there’s no way for us to safely engage his ships, even with our superior acceleration, maneuverability and speed.
As she watched the map display incrementally update the number of ships Gerrel had somehow managed to bring from the Quarian Heavy Fleet, Commander Williams finally accepted the inevitable – the Normandy was definitely going to need backup… and Shepard and the Knight Shade weren’t going to be anywhere near enough. *If too many more heavies are hidden out there, we’re gonna need the whole damned Council Fleet.* “Specialist,” she addressed Dubow. “I’m going down to deck three for a bite to eat. Call me if you happen upon a large number of additional ships.”

“Aye, Ma’am.”

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**Etheai Mountains, Sanves, Ialessa System – 17 Aug 2188**

“Don’t you dare, T’Soni!” The rock beneath Shepard’s right hand had crumbled away, throwing her off balance and leaving her hanging only by the strength in her left hand as she struggled – feet flailing in the empty space below – to find, at the very least, one new support point. “Not unless I actually start to fall, anyway.” She panted with effort, the telltale tingle of Liara’s biotics fading as Samantha continued her search, finally finding a toehold – its little bit of extra leverage enabling her to push up just enough to grab the next rock outcropping over her head. Sighing in relief, she added, “At which point you are more than welcome to catch me and save my ass again.”

“I never would have believed I would find something that I was honestly better at than you!” Liara chuckled as she scrambled up yet another meter of the rockface, extending her lead over the Spectre as she climbed onto a ledge above; one with plenty of room to comfortably rest upon. Having no desire to get too far ahead, she paused and looked down over the rim to track her bondmate’s progress.

Shepard finally pulled herself onto the shelf, with a small bit of assistance from Liara, and rolled over onto her back to rest for a moment as she caught her breath. “There are lots of things you’re better at than me, Liara,” she wheezed.

“Like what?” asked the smiling Asari, curiosity coloring her tone.

“Like your biotics.” Shepard sat up and hugged her knees loosely near her chest as she looked at her bondmate. “Your natural, raw power is astonishing… and your level of control over it is something to behold.” Liara opened her mouth to object but Shepard heard her counterargument before it ever crossed her blue lips, so she continued without pause. “I agree that I may utilize my abilities better on a battlefield… but that’s because I have a soldier’s instinct, honed over years of practice.” Her eyes softened, and a troubled expression overtook her face as she added, “And that’s one of the things I love about you… that you haven’t assimilated my cynicism… my constant assessments of the worst-case scenario.”

Shepard huffed and shook her head slightly before continuing, “Yours is more of a protective streak that only comes out when necessary, either when you’re very angry or from desperation to protect those you love – you’re not teetering on the brink of readiness all the time like I am. You’ve felt it through the link from me – I know you have. Unlike you, when I walk into a place I’m not familiar with, or see people I don’t know, a little part of me – that dark persona within my mind – automatically dissects the situation… I can’t keep myself from looking for the shortest pathways to the exits… from ranking all the people in the room by threat level, then deciding who I need to watch more closely so I can take ‘em out of the equation first.” Her eyes dropped, and she stared at the rock shelf as she whispered, “What I really want is for us to have a time of peace that endures long enough for me to push that part of me to the side… or, better yet, lose it altogether.”
“Samantha...” Overtaken by a nearly overwhelming sense of hopeless longing from her *siame*, Liara instinctively reached down and placed her fingers under Shepard’s chin, lifting the Spectre’s head until their eyes met once more. “You only did such things out of necessity... and it eventually became instinct. I share your dream for the future... our future. I also wish for a galaxy where we can raise our children, without having to face any of the many horrors we were forced to experience. Is that not why we fought? Was that not our greatest motivation to keep pressing forward, even when all seemed lost?”

She smiled softly at the Human hunched before her. “Habits can be broken, my love... and this is one I will most earnestly assist you in leaving behind.” She released her *siame’s* chin and offered a hand to help the woman rise back to her feet. “Are you not the very person who, just yesterday, told me to let go of my feelings of guilt? That goes for you as well... and begins right now... while we are enjoying our honeymoon together.” She grinned and concluded, “Which means completing this climb and declaring victory once we reach the summit.”

“Together.” Shepard finally smiled again and leaned in, giving Liara a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Li.” She chuckled quietly and continued, “And that’s another reason I love you – your unrelentingly optimistic view of life.”

“Well, my dear Captain... I do believe *that* is a natural byproduct of having you in my life. How can I not be hopeful... knowing you will always be at my side?” Liara’s eyes shifted to the cliff face as she spied a potential route upward. “On that note, shall we resume our climb, so I may beat you to the top... and we can arrive back at our complex in plenty of time for dinner?”

“Absolutely, Doctor... though I'm not willing to cede victory to you quite so easily.” Shepard grinned and leapt into the air as she fired her jump jets, gaining an easy ten-meter head start on the Asari.

“Samantha! That’s cheating!” Laughing, Liara began her climb anew, scampering quickly up the rock wall in pursuit. “You’re only supposed to use those for emergencies!”

“It was an emergency, Blue,” Samantha laughingly called down over her shoulder. “You were about to best your captain on this climb!”

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On the crest up above, Captain Tanni and her team heard the jets fire and Livos immediately called the ground team. “Tra’ana... status!” Laughing, the lieutenant quickly responded, “Do not worry, Livos. Lady Liara is very obviously outclimbing Shepard... so, our good captain decided to give herself an advantage with her boosters. There is nothing to be concerned about.”

“Particularly since Liara is quickly making up the distance.” Riana grinned broadly as she continued, “I have seen her work her way through dig sites... Shepard has absolutely no chance of outclimbing our mistress unless she boosts herself all the way to the plateau upon which you currently stand!”

Liara could have easily been first to the top, catching and passing her climbing partner with ease but, once they were side-by-side again, she slowed. Looking over, she asked, “Just as you taught me tactics on the battlefield, would you like some tips and tricks so we can climb more efficiently together? Either way, I would rather climb at your side than race ahead... alone.”

“Unquestionably!” Shepard cast one of her trademark, lopsided grins and nodded rather enthusiastically. “I am most certainly not accustomed to having my ass handed to me quite so easily, Doctor. I’ll take any instruction you’re willing to offer!”
Their progress slowed considerably after that. Instead of a race, nearly every handhold turned into a lesson on grip techniques and body leverage as they made their way slowly up the remaining face. As they neared the top, Shepard gave her a nod of surrender. “Go ahead, Liara. You deserve to crest before I do. I’ll be right behind you.”

Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large – 17 Aug 2188

Ashley sighed as she grabbed a sandwich and a mug of coffee; turning, she sat down at the closest table, took a sip of her beverage and began to eat. She had to force herself to eat at a normal pace, when all she really wanted to do was wolf down her sandwich, slam down her coffee and get back to the CIC. Inwardly, she was a bit nervous about flying through a system with so many potentially unfriendly ships; council business or not, there was no other logical reason for the Normandy to be this far from the CGC, ghosting through a star system without a Mass Relay.

She had eaten half her sandwich when her XO, Lieutenant Commander Leon Rensch walked around the port elevator support and stepped up to the beverage station. After pouring himself a mug of coffee, he slid into the seat across from Ashley with a softly-voiced ‘Hello, Ma’am.’

Ash looked into his cool, gray eyes as she replied, “Commander.” Sensing the man had something to say, she inclined her head slightly as she asked, “What do you have for me?”

Rensch chuckled, took another sip from his mug, set it down and clasped his hands under his chin, elbows on the table. “Just thinking about what we’re doing out here, Ma’am. After kicking the Hell out of the Reapers, we should be able to just sit back, put our feet up and relax a bit; instead, we’re out here near the Rim, attempting to pin a location on every damned ship Xen and Gerrel managed to take along with them when they left the Migrant Fleet.”

The corners of Ashley’s mouth lifted slightly as she answered, “Yeah, that’s part of life in the Navy, Mr Rensch… and me being a Spectre. If it wasn’t the Quarians, it’d be Blue Suns over in the Terminus or leftover Batarians stirring up trouble in the Traverse. I sometimes think the galaxy thrives on chaos.” Taking another bite from her sandwich, she chewed slowly as she thought about their trip so far. She downed the rest of her coffee, looked up at her XO and added, “What really concerns me is Gerrel. He’s got the majority of the heavy fleet out here, and he’s already shown his total disregard for the safety of anyone working for him.”

Leon looked at her quizzically as he inquired, “What do you mean?”

“I presume you’ve looked at the names on the memorial wall facing the elevator. There’s one name on that wall that wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t for Han’Gerrel vas Neema, Commander.” Ashley rose from her seat, poured herself another mug of coffee and sat back down. With a sigh, she continued, “We were in the Perseus Veil to rescue the Quarians from the Geth. Lance Corporal Bethany Westmoreland – ‘Westie’, I used to call her – was on Commander Shepard’s squad, aboard a Geth dreadnaught that had been pounding the Quarians senseless. When the team dropped the shields and disabled the cannon, that son-of-a-bitch Gerrel had the heavy fleet start firing on the ship, before we had a chance to get our people off the damned thing. Beth fell when a walkway literally crumbled away from beneath her feet… and a jagged shard of torn metal ripped an unrepairable, ragged gash across a suit seal at the base of her backplate as she slid down to the level below.”

Ashley’s voice was matter-of-fact as she relayed the story, but Leon could see the Spectre had been deeply affected by the circumstances of what happened. She finished her sandwich, took another sip of coffee and concluded with, “Shepard couldn’t do a damned thing to save her, Leon…so she did the only thing she could do… she held Beth tight and talked to her as the light in her eyes went out.
She died for no other reason than Gerrel’s senseless need to destroy a ship that had ceased to be a threat.”

Rensch finished his own coffee. After placing his empty mug in the washer, he turned back to Ashley and said, “I would guess the Commander wasn’t happy when she returned to the Normandy.”

Ashley looked up at the man. “All the Quarian admirals were on this ship, Leon. In all the years I’ve worked with her, I have never seen the skipper so angry. She lit into Gerrel… grabbed him by his throat and slammed him to the deck one-handed. If Liara hadn’t made it to the War Room in time, I truly believe Shepard would’ve crushed Han’Gerrel’s throat, and we wouldn’t be out here now looking for his ships.”

“She didn’t get into trouble…”

“She was a Spectre, the commander of this ship… and Gerrel had committed treason by purposely firing on a ship with friendlies on board; she would have been within her rights to execute him.”

The Lieutenant Commander cocked his head slightly as he quietly asked her, “If your positions had been reversed, would you have killed him, Spectre Williams?”

“No, Commander, I don’t think I would have; we needed their damned fleet… desperately… to help us fight the Reapers. As it was, Shepard worked a miracle and somehow managed to get both the Quarians and the Geth to help us… but that was then. Now, while Admiral he may be to the Quarians… to the Council, the SILC are a sentient member species… so he’s a war-monger… and, should he and Xen succeed, a slaver and a damned criminal. To me, both then and now, he’s never been anything but a no-good, grand-standing glory-seeker. As far as I’m concerned, Bethany still deserves justice… and maybe, just maybe, his time to be on the receiving end of that justice is coming.”

Rensch nodded slowly, then said, “I have to get back to it, Ma’am. Thanks for the chat.” Turning, he left the way he’d come. Ashley listened for the elevator doors to retract; of some surprise, it was a full three or four minutes before she finally heard the doors swish open, and then closed. Must have been studying the memorial wall, she thought with a grim smile. Every name has a story to tell, if anyone cares enough to stop and listen.

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The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 17 Aug 2188

That evening at dinner, one during which a significant volume of alcohol had been consumed by all, Shepard willingly accepted the role of the gracious loser. “I have absolutely no problem with Liara’s excellence as a climber. Matter of fact, I found the day rather invigorating.” She smiled and reached over to squeeze Liara’s hand. “I look forward to similar forays where we can continue my lessons. I’ve never received formal free-climbing instruction; my experience has been limited strictly to technical climbing and boosted jumps… since most Humans don’t have the advantage of biotics to help control a fall.”

“I find you to be an adept student, Samantha.” Liara continued, “I would love to take you out on the rocks again.” All the commandos, including Livos, had either smiled knowingly or started to snicker as an image from Shepard came crashing into Liara’s mind… of them, together, as Liara made love to her, bringing her to climax on some remote, hidden rock shelf. Liara felt her skin grow incredibly hot as she realized the implications of the words she had spoken aloud and buried her face in her hands. “Goddess!”
Shepard’s face was also flushed but she couldn’t keep herself from adding, “And I’ll be happy to come with you, Liara. Anytime, anywhere!”

With that, the commandos’ smiles and giggles broke into fits of raucous laughter – contagious amusement where Shepard and Liara found themselves easily joining in until Liara stunned them all by saying, “Goddess! That is positively not what I meant when I said it…” She suddenly smirked at the Spectre and continued, “… but now I find I can’t stop myself from thinking about my next mountain conquest!”

“Liara!” Shepard’s face turned a bright crimson, making the commandos practically howl until they could hardly breathe.

When they finally calmed back down a bit, Livos managed to choke out, rather dryly, “So, our Little Wing had to bond before she finally figured out how to be a true maiden.”

Riana smiled understandingly at the blushing young Asari and quipped, “You have no reason to be embarrassed, Lady Liara. You are barely over a hundred and I imagine there are any number of potential amantias who will be greatly saddened by your late blooming… for it is far too late for them to attempt to draw your attentions now. You are, by far, too much in love to even consider such advances and Shepard is far too… monogamous… to share you!”

“To Hell with Shepard!” Livos surprised everyone with that comment until she continued and explained, “What? All I am saying is that I have too much respect for both them and their union to let any third party get close enough to even suggest such a thing. A match made by Athame herself could not have been better. Blazes! Given what had to be accomplished to get us all safely to this point in time, perhaps this union was orchestrated by the Goddess Athame herself… but, be that as it may, how it happened is no longer of any consequence!” She raised her glass and took a deep breath before continuing solemnly, “What does matter is that we are all present to celebrate the union of two positively wonderful beings, united as one unto eternity; Lady Liara and Captain Shepard!”

As soon as they had finished their drink in response to Livos’ toast, Liara stood from her seat and unabashedly dragged her willing captain, who grinned happily as she offered a silent wave of goodnight to the commandos, off to their bedroom.

As expected, Shepard was the first of the pair to awaken the next morning. Carefully slipping her shoulder from beneath Liara’s head and replacing it with a pillow, she climbed out of bed, emptied her bladder, got a drink of water, and slipped back between the sheets with her Anam Cara. She propped herself up on an elbow and peered down at Liara, who was in full repose, still sleeping soundly on her side – the simple rhythmic breathing of the Asari was a balm for Shepard’s soul. Thinking back to Liara’s comment a couple of nights prior, Samantha’s lips twitched into a grin as she whispered softly, “I could never be bored with you at my side, Grá mo chroí. I can just lie here watching you and be content. Do you not know that?”

Undisturbed, Liara slept through Shepard’s words; even knowing she was risking the Asari’s wrath, the daring captain affectionately caressed her sleeping lover’s arm, from shoulder to fingertips, before placing a gentle kiss on a soft blue shoulder. Okay... so maybe you’re right after all. I can’t just watch… I can’t not touch you. She smiled tenderly and, honestly doubting her Ioniún Álaimn would truly be as upset as she had implied, enlarged the target area for her tender caresses. She shifted her attention down to the back of Liara’s knee, trailing her fingertips up the hamstrings of the Asari’s upper leg, across a shapely hip and, at the end of her hand’s journey, finally crept to a halt upon a blue butt cheek.
As she gave Liara’s firm ass an affectionate squeeze, the Asari let out a soft hum in her sleep and stretched her leg out, rolled off her side – away from the Spectre in the process – and onto her back, placing her ample bosom in full view and making Shepard whistle quietly in appreciation.

She felt a twitch in her clit and groaned, “Damn it, Liara! You’re so beautiful, I just can’t help myself.” Samantha leaned over her lover and nestled into the exposed side of Liara’s neck, drawing a deep breath through her nose and relishing the scent of eezo and Thessian rose that seeped out from within the folds. Intimate familiarity guided her tongue as she slipped it into the sensitive crevices, seeking the source of the luscious pheromones that made it so difficult for the Human to resist the naked Asari at her side.

Both Liara’s heart rate and her breathing sped up… and then her eyes cracked open the very instant Samantha’s tongue found its target. Its warm, moist stroke through the delicate folds of skin along the side of her throat elicited a low groan of desire from the waking Asari before she was articulate enough to actually create speech. She realized she was trembling; Shepard had shifted, positioning herself above the Asari and the woman’s body pressed to hers. The strong scents of leather and musk in her nose augmented the sensations caused by the woman’s tongue caressing intimate places and had awakened more than just Liara’s conscious mind. She growled the name of her bondmate, stretched out and full of yearning, “Saaamaaantha…”

Her pelvis thrust forward in desire as her hands grasped Sam’s hips to keep the woman from moving away and she grunted in satisfaction when teeth closed gently on her neck in response. Liara’s initial waking thoughts of pleasure were immediately eclipsed with detailed visions of passionate acts spilling in from the mind of her Human – and only one coherent word made it successfully from thought to lips as the Asari demanded, “Please!”

With both obvious hunger and approval being present, Shepard leapt purposefully into Liara’s mind, showering her with love and devotion as their bodies began to writhe, moving tenaciously with a very singular goal in mind. Sensations merged as hands moved… fingers stroked, pressed, penetrated… biotics and mental images filling all the right voids where physical digits couldn’t reach… eager lips pursed, kissed, encircled and sucked while wet tongues teased, tweaked and lapped up the result of their efforts.

Shepard teetered on the edge and fell first, completely losing control of her limbs as she exploded in ecstasy; Liara following immediately behind as the sensations swept through the meld and dragged her, rather enthusiastically, off the cliff along with her bondmate. Tears of joy ran down both their faces as they collapsed, finally, in each other’s arms, minds backing away from the efforts of their attempts to draw much needed air into their lungs. Shepard was the first to speak. “Gods, Liara. I take it you aren’t angry that I woke you early?”

All Liara could do in response was laugh, wheezily, as she continued her attempts at drawing a full, satisfying breath. She finally flopped over onto Shepard’s shoulder and closed her eyes, still without a word, as she placed a possessive arm across Samantha’s taut abs and a bent leg over her hips, a foot gently pressing against the inner side of the woman’s calf.

Before Shepard could utter a single comment about the Asari’s actions, she realized Liara’s conscious mind had swiftly slipped beyond the edge of sleep. She smiled and lovingly wrapped her arm around the Asari, holding her tight as her own eyes closed, appreciating the drifting, contented emotions that wound their way from her Anam Cara through the link and found their way into her mind. Her own thoughts started to wander as she became less able to concentrate, so she simply let the soothing sensations of peace and warm comfort carry her along to a place of pleasant dreams.
It was a couple of hours later when the couple woke for the second time that morning. Reaching up to fondly caress Shepard’s cheek as their still sleep-blurred eyes met, Liara whispered lovingly, “Good morning, Siame.”

“Hey you.” Shepard caught Liara’s hand and brought it to her lips, tenderly kissing the backs of the blue fingers. “Are we ready to actually get up this time?” A grin spread across her face in response to the subtle blue blush creeping across Liara’s cheeks.

“I suppose we are.” The Asari paused before continuing with a coy smile on her face, “I am, certainly. My stomach is growling… and after all our early morning activity, I’m sure I need an eezo supplement along with breakfast.”

“Well, then...” Laughing, Shepard released her hand and rolled away, sitting up and climbing out of bed. “I’ll not have Doctor T’Lori after me like Karin always was.” She glanced at her chrono before looking back at Liara with an inviting grin, continuing, “And it’s way past breakfast, so I guess we’ll be eating brunch!”

A/N: Likely no chapter next week… super busy week at work and I don’t have much time to write. If I happen to get the next chapter finished in time, you’ll know when it pops up on the site! Have a great weekend!
The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 18 Aug 2188

After the previous day’s physical exertions, combined with both their late night and early morning sexual escapades, Samantha and Liara decided during brunch to simply relax at their resort complex for the day. Given the strength of the defenses surrounding each individual facility within the resort, their decision gave the commandos a bit of a breather as well. While those responsible for the couple’s safety would never entirely relax their guard when beyond the reach of a timely response from their own commando back-up teams on Thessia, a day within the shielded compound allowed them to wander the rather spacious area somewhat at ease. Not having to stand an actual watch shift meant they could truly enjoy themselves and engage in their own friendly competitions, all within relatively close proximity to their primaries.

While Livos and team basically stayed at the house, lounging by the pool and in the meditation garden, Tra’ana and her team had made their way to the biotic target range and were enjoying taunting and teasing one another through the seemingly unlimited number of variations on the provided course. Having practiced constantly with Liara and Shepard, Riana set the bar fairly high on her first round of targets. Tra’ana, after watching her own scores quickly – and seemingly easily – get bested, exclaimed, “Goddess Sim’re! It is no wonder you were chosen as Lady Liara’s First. Your solo abilities were daunting to begin with… and it seems your time aboard the Normandy has honed them to a finer edge yet.”

Riana chuckled good naturedly. “Skills which I am happy to pass on. The crew aboard the Normandy was varied, indeed, and each member brought a unique combination of abilities to our combat teams, the sharing of which was an obvious benefit.”

“Ahh.” Lusmeni was nodding her head slowly, as she was beginning to understand. “I see that same trait developing in Shepard’s second Spectre team under Hailot Jatok’s command. As they
learn to utilize one another’s strengths effectively, they are slowly but surely becoming a truly formidable squad. The differences in the total scores of each round we complete at the Arena are continuing to grow closer; I truly wonder how much longer we will maintain our dominance.”

Tra’ana grinned as she asked, “Why do you think our leaders have us doing mixed team drills? They are making sure we observe and learn the skills of the others. Their end goal is to have our personnel divided into two teams only for the sake of administrative purposes… They need the ability to take any combination of six from the Knight Shade, know they have the precise combination of skills required for the job, and be confident we can work together seamlessly as a unit, no matter what the combination of personnel looks like.”

“So… what?” Lusmeni frowned. “Does that mean their goal is to have us compete against the second team until we lose?”

“Of course not!” Sella reached over and punched Lusmeni lightly in the shoulder. “It means their goal is a challenge – for all of us to improve our skills, to the point where each match could result in either team’s victory because we have all reached an even higher point of excellence by learning from one another.”

“And now, I believe, we have rested long enough to begin our next round!” Tra’ana glanced at her teammates and continued, “And, seeing as Riana cleaned up on our last series, I say she has to go first, so the rest of us know what score we have to beat!”

“Argh! I’m never going to get this done!” For the umpteenth time, Shepard glanced over to the minimally dressed blue body stretched out on the lounger beside her, with nothing but a bikini – a surprisingly skimpy one at that, given the relatively conservative maiden who was wearing it – providing an irresistible temptation to Sam’s eyes. “Not with you constantly distracting me.”

Liara tipped her head in Shepard’s direction and reached up rather casually, using one finger to slide her sunglasses down her nose, in order to peer accusingly over them at the woman beside her. “I am doing no such thing… and what, exactly, are you not getting done… and don’t you dare tell me it has anything to do with work, Samantha Shepard, or you are about to find your lovely ass in a whole heap of trouble.”

“I know I won’t want to spend any time on it as our vacation draws to a close,” the Spectre responded rather guiltily. “I’m preparing our activation message and full staffing rosters for the Knight Shade… so it’s ready to send as soon as we arrive home.”

Liara sat up straight and turned to face her bondmate, still looking over her glasses and down her nose at the Human as she asked in a biting tone, “So you do it now, instead? At the beginning of our honeymoon? How is that any different than preparing it at the end?” A blue hand suddenly shot out, palm up. “Give that to me.”

“Give you what?” Shepard looked at her, momentarily confused, and Liara glanced pointedly at her left arm. As what her bondmate actually wanted her to part with fully registered in her mind, Sam’s voice squeaked in disbelief. “My omnitool?”

“Yes, your omnitool.” Liara did not relent, leaving her hand extended, fully expecting her amantia to comply. When the woman hesitated, she added, “Captain Shepard. Are you willfully disregarding a command from the Lady T’Soni?”

“Pulling rank now, T’Soni?” Shepard smirked in reply as she reluctantly powered the unit down and
removed it from her wrist; trusting that Liara was not going to do anything extremely drastic, she meekly handed it to the Asari.

“Thank you.” Liara promptly clipped it onto her own wrist, reactivated the device and started typing.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Sam’s voice was tinged with just a hint of panic as she began to stand.

“Sit.” Liara looked up for only a moment to make sure her captain complied with what was most certainly not a suggestion. As Shepard’s butt dropped back down to her own lounger, Liara continued, “I’m taking what you have completed of your report, sending it to Hailot Jatok and Harley Creath, and asking them to complete the draft for our review…” Her eyes came back up and met Samantha’s as she finished rather sternly, “… when we return home. Understood?”

Shepard blushed and, laughing softly, ran her left hand up over her head and through her hair before leaning forward, elbow on her knee and her chin resting in her cupped hand. Grinning at her Iônúin Aìlainn, she answered, “Yes, Ma’am. Understood.”

“Good.” Liara finished up and turned off the device before stashing it in her bag, purposely not returning it to its owner. Turning back to Shepard and flashing the woman a brilliant smile, she asked, “Now. With that settled, would you care to join me for a swim?”

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That evening, Shepard teamed up with Iryna Velros to prepare a full-up, traditional Asari dinner. “Thank you for the assistance, Nara.” Iryna glanced at her captain for only a brief moment before refocusing on her chopping. “The others always offer to help but, honestly? They can handle the basics, with instruction, but are horribly slow… they are obviously not chefs. Their goal when cooking is merely to create something edible, simply so they don’t starve to death!”

Laughing, the Spectre glanced up from the broth she was stirring. “Surely they can follow a basic recipe if handed one… Can’t they?”

Iryna rolled her eyes and cast Shepard a scathing look. “That is questionable. They don’t even know the difference between chopping, dicing, or mincing!”

Shepard smirked as she answered, “I imagine, whether they wanted to or not, everyone who was aboard the Aletheiwa with you knows the difference now.”

“Ha!” Iryna shook her head vehemently. “Perhaps so. Aresia and Falere learned how to cook, but they didn’t have a great variety of ingredients to work with, so know little of spices. But, they have keen minds and have been developing that taste over time… So, while I did most of the seasoning on the days they were in charge of the meals aboard ship, they are much better now than they were,” Iryna sighed. “I can’t believe how well they managed on Lesuss. I don’t know that I would have survived nearly as well.”

Shepard stared into the broth, swirling the spoon slowly and let out a sigh. “I still hate what happened there. Both in general, knowing a small part of your population is so feared… so reviled… those in charge feel the need to sequester them away from everyone and everything.” She pulled the spoon out and set it on a cradle before turning to Iryna. “And I hate that Rila was forced into such a sacrifice… because of those damned Banshees.”

“Shepard!” Iryna stopped what she was doing and turned to face her captain. “Rila knew what she was doing. She could not change what she was about to become, so chose to die in a way that
would contribute to our success. She took an honorable ending over what would have otherwise been an ignoble death.” She reached over and squeezed the woman’s forearm. “Remember – you gave her that choice; you enabled her to redeem herself in her passing.”

With a melancholy sigh, the Spectre replied, “You’re right, of course.” Shepard shook herself and looked around. “So. Cooking. What’s next?”

“If the broth is done…” Iryna asked with a gentle smile, “Can you braise the meat?”

“Absolutely.” Shepard pulled out a deep, covered fry pan and set to her new task. “So… what about the rest of the crew and their culinary abilities?”

“Miranda was probably the best, because she approached it just like any other task; very efficient and with extreme precision… but the simple task of dicing an onion took her five minutes because every little cube was exactly the same size!”

“I can see that,” Shepard answered with a huge grin on her face. “Miri is all about perfection. Judea hasn’t beaten that out of her yet.”

“Oh… and she never will!” It was Iryna’s turn to smirk. “Judea will always have the mind of an engineer, even if she does bring her passion for flying along with it… But, for her, there is no joy in cooking; she looks upon it as nothing more than a chore… a necessity of living, when she would rather be doing other things.”

“Alright… the beef is done.” Shepard pulled the pan and set it on the trivet beside the range.

Iryna shook her head and rolled her eyes. “It is not beef, Nara, and you know it.”


“Yes. And, while you finish up with that, I will shred the yefal and uloth… and then dish the vegetable mixture into a serving bowl.”

“Sounds good.” Shepard set to steaming the wraps to soften them, then quickly flipped each of them onto a griddle to brown each side before piling them on a platter. {Hey, Blue. Dinner in less than five. Want to call everyone to the table?}

Smiling sweetly, Liara sat up and closed the book she was reading on her omnitool. {Absolutely. The tantalizing aromas that are wafting about the house have made me positively ravenous, Sam. I am very much looking forward to dinner!}

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Palaven Command, Trebia, Apien Crest – 19 Aug 2188

“Ashley. It’s great to see you again.” Garrus stood alone at the console, but the captain of the Normandy could both hear and see the flurry of activity behind him as his projected image came into focus in the secure QEC chamber.

“Same here, Agent Vakarian.” The formality of Commander Williams’ response was a subtle warning to Garrus that she was not alone; he gave a nearly imperceptible nod to let her know he understood her unspoken message as she queried, “What have you got for us?”

“I have an update concerning our vanishing dextro supplies; we’ve tagged an attack prowler, the
Nalotir. The ship was designed and constructed by Cerberus late in the war.” His mandibles quivered in aggravation as he drew a deep breath before continuing. “The intel reports we have say it was discovered adrift in the Hades Nexus and appropriated by the Quarians; they upgraded it, probably with equipment designed by Daro’Xen. It’s extremely effective at intercept and disablement, allowing the damned Quarian pirates to board commercial vessels relatively unimpeded.” Garrus looked down as he drew in another deep breath of air. The intensity in his eyes was obvious as he looked back up to focus on the screen in front of him. “This is a ship that would be dangerous if it was flying under a Batarian flag; being in the hands of rogue Quarians, with the intellect to use it to its full capability, makes it an extremely dangerous ship, Spectre.”

“You said tagged…” Ashley said in a cautious voice. “Tagged, as in engaged in combat and damaged, or as in tagged electronically for surveillance and tracking?” Ashley had cocked her head slightly to the side and crossed her arms under her chest, silently hoping the Turians had blown the bastards into space dust, even while realizing Garrus wouldn’t be so agitated if the Nalotir had actually been destroyed.

“Unfortunately for them, a frigate and a light cruiser arrived just as the Nalotir was making ready to depart,” Garrus growled in response. “The damned thing is about the size of our frigates, maybe even a bit longer overall, and armed accordingly… but the really striking thing about that ship is its electronics gear. It apparently employed some sort of short-range scrambler, enabling it to sneak up on our freighter and steal her cargo and then, after blasting our ship with a single volley of disruptor torpedoes, it definitely demonstrated the same as it broke away from our cruiser and ran.”

Concern and empathy in equal parts could be heard in Ashley’s voice as she asked, “How many casualties, Garrus?”

Garrus’ slightly flared mandibles indicated relief as he replied, “Minor injuries to a few of the people on our freighter and cruiser… none on the frigate; it never had a chance to even get into the fight before the Nalotir vanished into the void!” The flanging voice took on a tone of astonishment as he added, “The thing is, that ship has a cloaking device! We don’t know if it was already part of the Nalotir’s equipment, or something engineered and added in by Daro’Xen.” He shook his head slightly in obvious imitation of a Human female with whom he had long been associated. “I’m hoping it was Cerberus engineering… if it was engineered by Xén, I’d wager a year’s pay that every damned one of their capital ships will have a version installed before they make a move.”

As expressionless as Turians seemed to be, Ashley’s countenance mirrored the uneasiness she could see in Garrus’ face. “Doesn’t really matter whether it was engineered by Xén or Cerberus, Garrus. The Quarians are quite adept at reverse engineering and replicating any equipment they retrieve, no matter the source.” She paused for several moments as she thought about all she’d just learned. “Besides which, if you’ll think back, you may remember the Quarians already had stealth technology when we encountered them at Dholen.”

The big Turian’s eyes went wide as he recalled the Normandy’s wartime trip to the Rim. “Right… right! Their envoy ship wasn’t detected until it was relatively close to the Normandy.” Looking down at what Ash assumed was a datapad, he studied it for several seconds before returning his gaze to the camera. “It didn’t actually vanish, Commander… more like it simply faded from our view. If our own ships hadn’t already had that vessel on sensors, we would have never been able to locate it. My report shows the hull was cold… no heat emissions at all.”

Ashley thought briefly about the troubling implications of Garrus’ report before continuing. “I presume you have records of the Quarians’ encounter with your freighter, as well as their defensive actions while retreating; please send me everything you have regarding this raid, particularly the electronic records of the ship’s escape. If possible, include an inventory of what was stolen… it may
show how desperate their situation has become. Han’Gerrel may be forced to make a move out of fear that his people will slowly starve; if that happens, it may work to our advantage.”

“Okay, Spectre Williams. I’ll send you everything we have on the incident, including the departure records from the relay. We’ll also go back through the previous thefts… see if we can tie them to the same ship.” Garrus felt much better for having talked to the Human Spectre. Any doubts he may have harbored concerning the woman’s readiness for the task of commanding a stealth frigate and being a Council Spectre had been put to rest by speaking with her today. Garrus was beginning to feel that Commander… and Spectre… Ashley Williams was exactly where the galaxy needed her to be.

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The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 21 Aug 2188

After a couple of days spent relaxing and playing at the complex, everyone was more than ready to be out and about again, even if for no other reason than to see and enjoy more of the resort and its available amenities. Selana had orchestrated a private, multi-day excursion at a secluded, quaint cabin in the woods. When they arrived at a relatively early hour in the morning, they were surprised by what had been described to them as a ‘minimally appointed’ residence. After the shuttle engaged its thrusters and departed, Liara looked at their escort in wonder. “Goddess, Selana! If this is what you call minimally appointed, I would love to see what you consider modest or grand when it comes to a little cabin in the woods!”

The group was making their way casually toward the cabin, the exterior of which could only be described as gorgeous. A large outer patio and deck overlooked a pristine, blue lake stretching out before them, where the sunrise caused the surface to glitter like diamonds as shore birds dived for fish and insects. “Thank you, Lady Liara.” Their escort smiled softly and dipped her head in acknowledgement of the compliment. “Though I am sure all of you must understand how everything I say should be taken in relation to the standards of our clientele… and not your average person, be they Asari, Human, or whoever. Consorts are obviously accustomed to rather deluxe accommodations.”

Selana had explained their particular cabin had been chosen for two purposes; first, it met their desire to be on a lake large enough to do some sailing and, second, it accorded enough lodging to accommodate the full T’Soni contingent and the required resort staff which, in this case, included Selana, along with two guides and a chef – the latter of which, upon Liara’s request, would be staying with the T’Soni party for the remainder of their stay. Liara had joked about it the day prior when she asked for the addition of a chef to their excursion. “The first few days have been fine, but we truly only have two cooks among our party… Iryna Velros and Samantha… both of whom should be enjoying the time off, not worrying about meal planning!”

“We frequently have requests to provide not only a chef, but a housekeeper and launderer for extended stays, along with any number of… let me simply say, unique… aides-de-camp, depending on the race and predilections of the primaries.” Selana had smiled and issued a genuine laugh as she continued, “Believe me, this is a wonderful reprieve from my normally rather demanding clientele. It is amazing what some expect a Consort to receive…” She suddenly grinned impishly. “…and while they don’t always get what they expect, they always get what they need.”

Shepard raised a brow and queried, “So, are we getting what we expect?”

Laughing, Selana dipped her head in obedient affirmation. “Absolutely, Spectre. There is nothing unusual or awkward about wanting to enjoy a beach, a bit of sailing, and guided hikes in the wonderful Záhrada Wilderness Area. And, with that said, let me introduce you to my staff.”
She turned and resumed her walk toward the cabin, beckoning the two who awaited them on the front patio. A silver-eyed, purple-skinned Asari with rather distinct facial markings, looking almost like lightning bolts, stepped up and dipped her head. “This is the resort’s lead guide, Carlina V’Zanto. She is native to Sanves and grew up in these woods; she has personally trained our entire guide staff, so there are no better companions in the galaxy to escort you safely through the Záhrada.”

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“Please, just call me Zan, and my job is to keep you out of harm’s way out here. It does not matter if you are out animal watching or merely out for a hike – if you are on dry land, you will all be armed whenever outside the fenced perimeter of the cabin.” She jerked a thumb at the rather tall Turian standing at her side. “This is Tarrenis Dukette, Duke for short – prior Cabal and the finest tracker on our team. If you desire one of your hikes to be more of a safari, he is more than up to the task and can show you a variety of the wildlife that fills these woods.”

“We do have large carnivores that regularly prowl these woods…” After having spent so much time with Garrus Vakarian, the group instantly recognized the worried frown on the big Turian’s face as Tarrenis took over and continued, “…and while we do not wish to kill anything which resides here, if stun weapons are not enough, we will most definitely do what is necessary to protect ourselves.”

He reached over his own shoulder and fluidly pulled a rifle from its hardpoint on his back. “I’m sure you believe you recognize this, but I’ll tell you anyway because it’s very likely not what you think.” He paused as his eyes traveled to look into those of every commando responsible for the safety of the recently bonded couple. “This is an early edition, level ten, Geth Armory Pulse Rifle. Very much unlike the absolutely ruined newer editions from the Elkoss Combine Arsenal, this original gun packs a punch. Elkoss modified it to be a standard assault rifle, where they almost tripled the shot capacity and fire rate but cut the accuracy to less than half of what it used to be.”

Shepard shrugged her shoulders and added, “Elkoss made those changes so the average soldier could use it with little-to-no training, counting on a flood of gunfire instead of skill… but they ruined a great weapon in the process. How in Hell did you find one?”

“You know your weapons, Spectre. Good to see.” Tarrenis flashed his version of a smile. “You went and made friends with the Geth… turned them into the SILC… so I simply asked one if they could start making these weapons again. The Consensus was more than happy to have the business and guaranteed they would only be sold to legitimate security firms.” He waggled his mandibles in humor. “Which means extremely limited distribution – and only to firms willing to sign a guarantee of no secondary sales… Though I imagine you wouldn’t have any trouble getting your hands on a few if you really wanted them.”

He refocused on the remainder of the group before him and continued, “Those of you unfamiliar with the weapon… It has a variable power control, where anything below three will only succeed in angering a large predator, anything from four to seven should knock most off their feet, with the higher range actually stunning it; a setting from eight to ten will seriously injure or kill any of the large predators found in these woods.” He glanced at his rifle and indicated the setting wheel. “I pretty much keep mine set at five at all times… but you must know exactly where this is and what direction to rotate it, in case of emergency.” His eyes narrowed as he concluded, “Your very lives may depend on it.”

“Livos Tanni, Captain of Lady Liara’s private guard.” Livos stepped forward as she spoke so Tarrenis could easily identify the speaker as she asked, “You are ex-Cabal, so you should know. What about the use of defensive biotics?”

“Ah, that’s right. Sorry… I guess I should have explained that.” Tarrenis docked his rifle and
continued, “We’re not talking about enemy combatants that possess logical thought processes here. These are wild animals which don’t understand terms of surrender. You can’t capture them by putting them in stasis and then talk them out of their attack. You stun them and use the time to retreat from their habitat; if they purposely track you down again, it’s only for one purpose. At that point, it’s kill or be killed. Simple as that, unless you want to risk the wellbeing of your primaries.”

“Understood.” Livos gave him a sharp nod, indicating her acceptance of his reasoning.

“So, if we go out with the sole purpose of a game drive, I prefer anyone who carries a weapon be equipped with this one… unless your weapon of choice has a stun setting.” He glanced around the group and shrugged. “We go out to observe, not to hunt, so use of deadly force will be looked at very carefully and could result in a premature end to your vacation here. Is that also perfectly clear?”

“Yes, Duke.” Liara nodded and continued, “We are fully aware that no hunting is allowed anywhere within the resort preserve... and that your rules are simply a precaution to keep everyone, including the animals here, safe and well.” She glanced over at the third member of the staff, who had joined them from inside as the Turian had spoken, and added with a smile, “Not to provide us with something to cook over the camp fire for dinner.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Selana. “Excellent timing! This is Master Chef Falyna… the best we have on staff within the focus of eezo-boosted, levo-protein based diets. Seeing as you all will be out and about most of the day, she has prepared lunches for you to pack with you, and we’ll have your evening meal ready shortly after you walk back in the door… giving you enough time to get cleaned up and dressed for dinner. If you are satisfied with your meals over the next couple of days, she will return to your complex with you, as you requested, for the remainder of your stay with us.” Glancing at the door, she added with a smile, “Shall we enter and see your accommodations?”

Having seen the outside during their approach and heard Selana’s sensible explanation, they were less surprised at what they found within the cabin. The downstairs held a relatively small but well-equipped corner kitchen, placed within an expansive and nicely-appointed great room, while the upstairs contained standard bunkhouse-style lodging. A double row of twelve single bunks, each with a privacy surround curtain, lined each wall and formed an aisleway leading to a single master suite, which was located on the side opposite the stairway.

Selana and her staff took the first four beds near the top of the steps. Riana and Livos took the two beds closest to Liara and Shepard’s private room, while the remaining commandos spread out amongst the remaining beds closest to the suite. As they selected their bunks, Selana quietly informed them, “Should any of you desire, the beds are not affixed to the floor and can be combined to form a larger bed… for one or more persons… as you wish.”

Livos chuckled quietly and responded brashly, “Thank you for the option, Selana, though I doubt any will take advantage of it for other than cuddling. Even though accompanying Lady Liara and Shepard on their honeymoon, we are all on duty… especially here, outside of the domed complex.”

Carlina V’Zanto shook her head and replied, “That is not necessary, Captain. We have regular patrols and watch points in the area and I will immediately receive notice if there is any unusual activity near the outer fence boundary. You cannot see it from here, but the fence is a double-layered perimeter system, with the second fence out another hundred meters from the first, creating a warning buffer. The inner gates are locked at dark and if anything manages to break through the outer boundary, a warning siren goes off ten seconds before the inner fence electrifies. I will also get a call to put the house on notice, waking any who haven’t already bolted out of bed from the siren. I will receive coordinates for the point of penetration and movement updates for whatever came through.”

“Please know that I intend no offense by the asking, but what is the reliability of the defenses?”
Livos looked at Carlina with a Captain’s expectation of a prompt answer, at which their lead guide smiled.

“No offense taken, Captain Tanni, as I would expect no less.” She shrugged quickly and said, “We test monthly and in my twelve years on staff here, we’ve had only three outer breaches; zero inner.”

“And those outer breaches?” Tanni wasn’t quite yet satisfied.

Letting out a loud guffaw, V’Zanto answered, “Each contained and closed out within thirty minutes, Captain… but I can see you want details. One was a panicked male korista being chased by a dravec, another was a grumpy medvuda. She was hungry, coming out of hibernation… and following the smell of a cookout, but wanted nothing to do with the electrified fence. The most recent was a pack of varren chasing a female in heat. None of the three ended badly, except for the korista; he ended up dead after electrocuting himself when he ran headlong into the fence… and was then promptly dragged back to the dravec’s den for dinner.” The guide finished with a grin. “The female varren ended up bearing five pups that spring and we received the unique privilege of getting to watch them all grow over the course of last summer.”

Responding to the guide’s jovial mood, Livos finally gave in and smiled. “Thank you, Zan, I appreciate you being so forthcoming.” She continued with a smirk, “And please, call me Livos; I’m on vacation.”

“My pleasure, Livos.” She winked at the captain and turned to the rest of the group. “Now that we all know the rules and where each of us is sleeping, drop your bags, pull out what you want for the day and head downstairs. I believe Falyna has a variety of foodstuffs for you to pick from for snacks and I’ll give you the quick tour… emergency facilities, how to operate the fence, the gates, the radios… all that business, in the event something catastrophic happens to both Duke and me – you’re a long way from your ship.” She once again flashed an engaging smile. “After that, we’ll talk over lunch and figure out what you want to do for the next few days!”

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The waning hours of the evening found Captain Tanni and Carlina V’Zanto sitting alone by the outdoor fire pit, the balance of the T’Soni guests and staff having retreated to the loft sleeping quarters for the night. As Carlina poked the fire and added another log, Livos queried quietly, “So, do you often keep watch late into the night, when outside of the main resort compound?”

“No, I do not.” Carlina smiled softly. “But that is because, most often, I am never away from the main resort.” Her unusually pure silver eyes rose from the fire to meet Livos’ gaze. “Due to the stature of your primaries, the resort director informed me, in no uncertain terms, that I would personally see to your safety during this little expedition and that my deputy would watch over the remaining clients in my absence.”

“Sorry.” Livos turned away to stare into the flickering light of the flames. “I hope we are not an inconvenience to you.”

“No, you most definitely are not.” A barely perceptible chuckle floated through the air, like a wisp of smoke, across the space between the two Asari. “Matter of fact, I am thankful for the break in routine… and very happy to have met you, Captain. My duties normally preclude me from interacting directly with the guests… unless something untoward has occurred. This is a rare privilege for me… one which I will not squander.” Carlina hesitated before continuing, her voice even lower than their prior conversation. “I find myself… after our defenses and tactics discussions over lunch… very much intrigued by you, Captain. I hope I am not being too forward, making you uncomfortable, or infringing upon any relationship of which you are likely a party to.”
Following a quick chuff of a laugh, Livos responded, “No. There is no one. My duties with House T’Soni have been longstanding; first, as a team leader in Armali while Matriarch Benezia still lived…and next, as Captain of Lady Liara’s personal guard. Between the Matriarch’s demanding schedule…and then the war, there has been no spare time for me to actually enjoy a personal life. My lifestyle would be extremely unfair to anyone who cared to partner with me.”

Carlina’s brow furrowed in consternation as she replied, “I believe that is one of the saddest statements I have ever heard, Captain. Everyone needs… someone who they can call, at the very least, a good friend… if not more. And, I do believe, you are making erroneous assumptions. I understand a busy schedule, but even the most stalwart warriors need downtime… to recharge themselves. Secondly, perhaps there is at least one out there who believes whatever time you have available would be better than nothing at all.” The furrow in her brow smoothed and her lips curled into a smirk as she continued, “And, I for one, find that little in life comes easy… You have to be willing to work for what you want; the greater the effort, the greater the reward.”

“Yes, I would agree.” Livos nodded and she dropped her eyes back to the fire. “Especially after the past few years. I take nothing for granted anymore… particularly the simple fact that I still have a life to lead and did not perish in the war, as so many others did.”

“So, I say again…” Carlina cleared her throat, attempting, but failing, to recapture the captain’s gaze. “I am intrigued by you… in ways beyond simple curiosity, Livos Tanni. Your schedule would perhaps make a relationship between us a challenge… but the first obstacle I must surpass is you continuing to ignore my advances, as you did the first.”

“I…” Livos paused and shook her head as she let out a quiet sigh. “I did not ignore it. I simply do not know how to respond… other than…” She stopped again, bringing her eyes back up to look once more into the piercing silver ones looking back, expectantly. “I am more than five hundred years of age and have never had a true mate… Zan.” With the unexpected topic at hand, the guide’s familiar name suddenly came hard to Livos’ lips, even though she had been using it rather casually throughout the day. The commando captain swallowed and shrugged before her shoulders slumped in defeat. “I do not believe I know how to separate myself from my work; it is all consuming to me… always has been.”

Carlina reached over and tentatively took Livos’ hand; when the captain did not withdraw from her touch, she smiled softly and whispered, “And I am 499 and could say the same, except for a few flings during my maiden years… but they, most likely, do not qualify as true mates either.” Giving the hand within hers a light squeeze, she added quietly, “Being completely honest with you, assuming the… intellectual attraction, if nothing else… is reciprocal, I would like for us to try, my dear Captain of the T’Soni Personal Guard. At least give us the opportunity to get to know each other while you are here… and we can go from there?”

A shadow crossed Livos’ expression and she slowly pulled her hand back as she stood from her chair. Staring into the fire, she whispered, “I do not know if that is wise, Zan. Once this trip is over, it could be a very long time before we see one another again. I do not see how it could possibly work.”

“You say you do not see how it could work, but you did not say no, either.” The bold Asari rose quietly behind her and continued, her voice at a volume equal to Livos’ whisper. “You intrigue me, Captain Tanni, and I think such a relationship would very much be worth the effort. I do not understand your reticence… other than, perhaps, friendly losses you may have suffered during the war?”

“My life is complicated.” Livos stared at the flickering tongues of the fire at her feet. “I am like the
flame… always moving. Being the Captain of Lady Liara’s Personal Guard is not my only job. Lady Liara is also the XO of Captain Shepard’s Spectre vessel, so I am, by default, the Team 1 Lead aboard the *Knight Shade*. Once this vacation… their honeymoon… is over, I do not know what my schedule will be. I cannot make commitments to anyone but Lady Liara.”

“I see.” Carlina’s voice drew closer as she continued, “Does the idea of having someone special eagerly awaiting your homecomings, no matter how few and far between, bring you anxiety… or joy? Do you believe you would fear it… or would you be brave enough to try having a lover?”

As Carlina said ‘lover’ and wrapped her arms around the commando from behind, Livos drew a sharp breath before haltingly answering, “Goddess forgive me, but… yes.”

Carlina’s breath was warm against Livos’ neck when she chuckled quietly and asked, “Yes, it frightens you, or yes, you feel it worth making an attempt?”

Livos closed her eyes to improve her focus, enjoying the sensation of the warm body pressed against her back… the arms wrapped possessively around her midriff… and laughed nervously as she answered again with only one word. “Yes.”
Ripples of Change

Chapter Notes

Right out of the gate with Shmex! And, if you remember how the last chapter ended, you can guess who!

AFC - Alliance for Change (Thessian/Source: CDN, including Huntress Sikara Mendaras and Matriarch Galalina Niaso)

Amantia - lover (Thessian)

Ionúín Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Le‘wêth - the soft ridges extending from beneath the rear of the scalp, merging into the back of the neck (Source: CDN)

Maglev – Magnetic Levitation transportation

Nara - literally "bearer"; one who shoulders another's burden, aids others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 22 Aug 2188

Carlinia’s lips curled into a smile against Livos’ neck; the guide’s voice was soft and quietly soothing as she breathed, “I do not mean to frighten you, Livos; that is the farthest thing from my mind. My intentions are quite the contrary.”

The Asari’s breath was warm on her neck, in contrast to the growing chill of the night, and Livos attempted to relax into the embrace, only to find it difficult to simply… let go. “I do not know how to do this. I have always been independent… and such a relationship would be extremely unfair to you…” Her words trickled off into silence as a pair of strong hands gently slid up her sides, and then moved to tenderly massage the knots in her shoulders.

“What is fair to me is for me to decide… and we have more than a week yet, do we not?” With only an appreciative groan from Livos in answer, she continued, “We have more than half our lives stretching out before us and, with the way you make me feel simply by being at my side, I will happily enjoy whatever you are willing to offer me during that time.”

“I will admit the temptation is great, Zan.” Livos groaned again as a strong thumb dug into a particularly tight knot. “Goddess, that feels good. But, at the end of my time here, we need to have defined where we stand with one another. I will not be able to focus on my duties properly if my personal life is in turmoil.”

“Then I will get on with it… and remove these doubts you have.” Zan feathered a soft kiss across the back of Livos’ neck that sent a pleasant shiver down the commando’s spine. “I will begin by telling you a bit about myself… and get my unpleasant beginnings out of the way. My family is
rather… unique, but I’d rather not talk about the family business nor the credits they earn by running it. I hope it is sufficient for me to tell you they reside on Illium. Once I graduated from Nos Astra University, I never returned again… my conscience would not allow me to do so.”

Livos stiffened at the words and Carlina was immediately concerned. “How did you connect my surname and Illium so quickly? Have I just destroyed any chance of us ever being together, simply by mentioning my criminal family?” She used her hands on Livos’ shoulders to gently turn the commando about so she could meet her eyes. “I swear to you… I have had nothing to do with them in nearly 400 years! So please, do not judge me by their actions.”

“I have to admit, it is definitely cause for concern to me.” Livos frowned, feeling as though the flame which had just started to flicker to life in her heart had been so quickly doused – before it ever had a chance to truly shine. “It could place House T’Soni in a vulnerable position, should a connection with a family such as that be discovered. I… cannot do this.” She went to take a step back; V’Zanto, refusing to release the grip on her shoulders, stepped with her.

“It will only be a detriment if we attempt to hide it, Livos!” Zan’s happy expression crumbled away with the emotional blow, her hope fading with Livos’ seemingly resolute words. “Bribery and extortion can only exploit secrets that people do not wish to have revealed. My family would be unable to gain any traction if I reveal everything to you… and Lady Liara.” She paused, finally releasing her hold on the commando’s shoulders and allowing her arms to hang at her sides. Her lips became a tight line as she gained resolve. “So that is what I will do; I will not let the beginning of my life – a beginning over which I had no control and which I refuse to own – come between us, Livos. Please… know that as soon as I was old enough, I took the necessary steps to escape that life; I will open myself to any and all scrutiny… by Lady Liara, by Spectre Shepard… by a damned Justicar if it is required of me! Just… please, Captain. Do not shut me out of your life without giving me a chance to prove myself to you.” Zan’s silver eyes had clouded as she pleaded with the commando. “There is nothing in my past… absolutely nothing… for which I am ashamed!”

Livos stared at Zan in surprise; the vehemence, the passion, with which she defended herself… and the potential relationship she could not yet define, much less be sure it would even last longer than the week… plucked at Livos’ heart strings, and she immediately realized she could not turn her back on this Asari, even though her analytical mind was telling her she should. “Nothing about love is ever rational, is it?”

Confused, Zan blinked several times, her defensive tirade grinding to a halt at Livos’ outwardly random statement… one that appeared to challenge the truthfulness of her words. “What are you talking about? I hold no love for anyone in my family. The first few years after I left, my mother tried every low-down, manipulative scheme she could imagine to get me back in her clutches.” The moisture that had begun tarnishing Zan’s lustrous silver eyes increased to the point of overflowing, sliding in tiny rivulets down amethyst cheeks; she wiped them away with angry swipes of her hands as she backed away and plopped down into the chair she had previously occupied.

Stunned by the unexpected turn of events, Livos momentarily froze as Zan gasped, voice choked with emotion. “She is the primary reason I could never have a serious relationship. The one time I thought ‘just maybe,’ my mother twisted it back on me for leverage… by kidnapping my amantia. I eventually persuaded my family to release her… after convincing them I would go to the authorities and reveal all their darkest secrets.” She sighed sadly, remembering the pain her mother had caused her. “In the end, my resolve meant nothing; Leona spat in my face and refused to have anything more to do with me. Not that I blame her. Our… connection… was forever broken and I never saw her again.”

V’Zanto stared at the ground in stony silence as the unwelcome memory caused a phantom hand to
reach into her chest. As it began to squeeze any hope from her heart of having even a fleeting romance in her life, she huffed in resignation. “I was young and inexperienced then… and, even though nearly 400 years have passed since that time, perhaps I am still as naïve as when I was a young maiden… particularly when it comes to love… if your reaction is anything to judge by.”

Livos moved quickly to Zan’s chair and went down on her right knee before her, reaching out and taking her hands. “That is not what I meant, Zan; I apologize for my phrasing being so unclear. Even though every logical thought in my mind is telling me to run away from this, my irrational heart says that I must stay. I cannot lie to myself about you… there is definitely an attraction between us… even if it does require us to go against convention and defy all logic if we wish to have any hope for a longer term connection. That is why I said there is nothing rational about love.”

Livos waited as hooded eyes, still shimmering with remnants of the tears her words had caused, guardedly came up to meet her gaze – only then did she continue. “I am saying yes, Zan. I want to give a relationship between us a try…” Livos suddenly smirked as she saw the light of hope brighten the silver eyes into which she gazed. “… and I would absolutely love to see your mother make an attempt at taking either one of us from the protective custody of Lady T’Soni and Spectre Shepard.”

Zan closed her eyes for a moment as she drew a deep, calming breath, feeling the vise that had clamped onto her heart slowly loosen and fade away. “Thank the Goddess,” she whispered as her eyes opened again to see Livos still down on one knee before her. She slid from the chair, mimicking the pose, with her left knee offset just enough to slide past Livos’ hip, so their torsos could touch. Cupping the face before her, Zan placed what started as a chaste kiss upon lush, welcoming lips.

Livos felt her body shudder with the contact and she whispered in surprise, “It has been a long time since anyone has kissed me so…” Her heart raced and she found it hard to catch her breath as the organ seemed to flutter out of control in her chest. “My heart feels as though it will burst from my chest… may the Goddess help me!”

“No one can save you now, Livos Tanni.” Zan grinned and pushed Livos to the side, laying her down in the grassy soil beside the fire and enveloping her in a full-body caress. Her lips wandered across Livos’ chin and down to an unprotected neck, the Asari beneath her gasping as teeth closed on sensitive folds and hands pulled upwards to untuck Livos’ shirt. A purple hand slipped beneath the cloth to tenderly stroke across the blue skin of her now exposed lower back.

Had she desired to do so, she was completely unable to stop her body’s reaction; Livos arched off the ground to give the wandering hand room to operate, even as she silently probed her own mind. You have gone absolutely insane, Tanni! What if someone sees us out here?

As she questioned her response to V’Zanto’s advances, her hands found leverage and she flipped them both over, dislodging the teeth from her neck as she sat up. She still arched wantonly into the loving fingers gently working their way into the sensitive folds of her lower back, the stimulating touch inducing a moan of pleasure from between her lips and blotting out any further resistance. This may be crazy, but I don’t care… I want… No! I need this!

She leaned down over Zan and claimed her mouth in a deep, sensual kiss, before nibbling on the guide’s bottom lip, gently gripping it with her own lips before pulling away, only to move to her partner’s neck. Placing hot fingertips on the side of Zan’s jaw, she gently turned the Asari’s head to the side for better access, before running the velvet warmth of her tongue through the exposed crevices of her lover’s le’wëth.

Being so close to the fire, Zan was sweating, yet her body shivered with an excited chill as the
commando captain’s skillful tongue continued to tease the tender folds of her neck. The tang of eezo settled onto Livos’ taste buds and, with the sexually provocative contact now proceeding in both directions, Zan breathlessly groaned, “By the Goddess… Livos! For not knowing how to do this, you seem extremely proficient at it! Will you meld with me… please?”

Zan had not ceased her own ministrations and the guard captain felt another quiver of intense pleasure shake her to her core. *Zan has undeniably skilled fingers!* Eager to fulfill the request, Livos replied quickly, her eyes swiftly turning obsidian as she whispered in a barely audible voice, “Embrace eternity!”

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**Abandoned Mine, Undisclosed Location, Milky Way – 22 Aug 2188**

Jorè Lentos stood over the lifeless body of tried and convicted former Security Chief Lenes Arim. Looking at the face, remaining twisted in anger even in death, the Colonial Administrator growled, “Damn your ancestors, Lenes! Why could you not have been more patient… or more understanding?”

Lenes Arim’s little rebellion had cost them dearly; of his twenty soldiers, fifteen had participated in the attempted military coup, along with twenty civilians. Now, of the 200 souls that had survived – despite the best efforts of the Reapers to completely eradicate them from the galaxy – forty were now dead, casualties of Arim’s ill-considered attempt to usurp Lentos’ leadership. Given their critically low population level, it was a blow from which they might not recover.

Lentos slowly lowered the heavy pistol he had used to execute the traitor and sighed; looking over the assembled crowd, he intoned, “This is a sad day… when one of our own contributes toward our extinction by leading a revolt, when our numbers are already too few. Compliments of the races above us, we somehow survived the harvest… and if the rumors are true, such evil will *never* be revisited upon the inhabitants of the Milky Way. Thus, we survived only for the remnants of our civilization to be placed in dire jeopardy by one of our own!” His eyes closed for a brief moment before he stated, “Let this be a lesson. We must all work toward our survival, together, or we will all fail… at which point it could be very possible that our entire race would forever cease to exist.”

Lead scientist Arick Vythan stepped forward to break the somber mood, declaring, “There is *some* good news – we have finally established the viability of the stored genetic cache… by successfully birthing our first recombinant-DNA child!”

A collective shout of approval sounded from the crowd and he smiled. “Yes, I know. It gives us hope of restoring sufficient genetic diversity within our population for us to endure. Assuming the child thrives and matures to adulthood, we will no longer need to fear genome degeneration… the Prothean peoples will survive!”

As the crowd quieted, Aelia Dethan stepped forward. “We must accept our new reality. As first female, the idea of… creating… children in this way is utterly appalling to me; yet, I recognize the necessity. Arim was unable to see this. He was also unable to accept that the *primitives*, as he insisted upon referring to them, accomplished the total defeat of the Reapers. The reality is that they managed this in a war lasting less than a decade… something we were unable to accomplish over the span of three centuries… it is time for us to recognize that we are no longer the galaxy’s master race – to them, we may very well be the primitives.”

Jorè nodded understandingly as the crowd started to grumble. “As Aelia stated, whether we like it or not, this new reality must be embraced by all of us. To that end, we must also accept that our carefully hoarded supplies are dwindling. This planet offers us nothing more than what was stored
here in the hidden vaults, and I consider us fortunate to even have that stockpile after all this time. We have been here for less than forty years and have consumed nearly half our supplies. That gives us less than forty more – assuming we grow our population as necessary to survive as a race – to come up with a solution, or a plan – either to attempt a relocation, in secret, or to simply… reveal ourselves… to the new masters of the galaxy.”

“As such, we have two primary tasks ahead of us. First, we cannot remain hidden indefinitely, so we must come together and decide the timing and conditions of our emergence.” Aelia gave a nod toward Arick as she continued, “And second, while we consider our options, we must reproduce using the genetic cache, so our numbers are more stable and our genome can become more diverse. We have no idea how long the stored genetic material will remain viable, so we must all participate… and quickly… females by donating eggs for fertilization, and males by ensuring no one like Lenes, or any outsider, ever threatens our survival again.”

Lentos stood silently for a few moments as his eyes swept across the small crowd. Squaring his shoulders, he stated, “A couple more things.” Pointing at a soldier in the front row, he called the soldier’s name. “Ruso Lukens. As the ranking officer of the remaining military members, you have just been promoted to be our new Chief of Security. Congratulations! Please come see me when we are done here. For the rest of you, please return to your appointed tasks, and remain vigilant… ever watchful. The fate of the entire Prothean race may rest on our shoulders; we must not fail.”

The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 22 Aug 2188

“Captain Tanni. A word, please?” The day in the woods had been incredibly fun, but Liara was slightly concerned; it seemed as if the commander of her Personal Guard was somewhat out of sorts – she was either ill or had something particularly bothersome on her mind. Livos was nowhere near her normal attentive and observant self and Liara felt the need to understand why.

They had spent the day hiking; first to a secluded grotto with a plethora of birds, small animals and beautiful flowers… a secluded, quiet place of reflection where they had all stripped and dived into the crystal-clear waters of a hot spring-fed pool to refresh themselves after the long trek. V’Zanto had been extremely knowledgeable about the grotto’s flora and fauna, and happily answered questions about both subjects, between bites of her lunch. The guide seemed much more at ease outside of the confines of the resort complex than she had appeared the day before, when they were still contained within. Likely because they had to explain the rules for our excursions, so it was all business. This is probably as much fun for her as it is for us… getting out and about to share these beautiful vistas with guests must feel like its own reward.

Next, they had climbed from the cave to an upper mesa, there to rendezvous with a transport, which had then carried them to an entirely different sector of the resort. When they were once more on the ground, they had traversed some rather difficult, rocky terrain, with both V’Zanto and Dukette on full alert. Duke had even pulled and readied his weapon at one point while whispering, “Be quiet and be on guard here. It is a beautiful day and we are passing within the hunting range of a medvuda den. It is already beginning to get cold at night up here in the mountains, so they are trying to bulk up before their winter hibernation… They will happily kill and eat anything they can find and overpower… and I sincerely don’t want it to be any of us.” He then grinned and added, “It makes for an awful lot of reports that must be filled out and filed once I return to the office!”

Curious as to why their guides would take them through such a dangerous area, but not wanting to disturb their focus while they did so, Liara waited until they had cleared the zone and Duke had
noticeably relaxed before she posed the question about their chosen route. “Ahh… Patience is a virtue and you’ll know soon enough, Lady Liara.” He flared his mandibles with a chuckle at the expression on her face and added, “The area through which we are traveling is a biologically sensitive region that cannot sustain powered traffic… so, if we want you to have the privilege of seeing what lies ahead, we are forced to resort to foot travel. Our destination is just over this next crest.”

Once they made their way to the top of the hill, the view was absolutely stunning; Liara believed the whole of the resort to be visible at their feet… the entire 400 square kilometers. Vaituloto Lake dominated the center, while several smaller lakes were scattered throughout. Liara glanced at Duke and grinned. “Goddess, you are correct! This is most definitely worth the hike up here; it’s undeniably gorgeous!”

Samantha had slipped up behind her and placed a chin on Liara’s right shoulder while wrapping her arms around her Iónúin Álainn’s waist. “Almost as beautiful as you, Liara… but you still win, hands down.”

“Oh… stop it!” Liara blushed furiously as Duke chuckled at the mischievous expression on the Captain’s face. “I could be up to my knees in a swamp with mud all over me and you’d say the same thing! You are a terrible flirt, Siame!”

It was then that Liara first noticed Livos standing off to the side by herself, staring off to the horizon and looking rather… distracted – as if contemplating some troublesome issue – an expression very much unfitting, both for Livos and for the beauty surrounding them. Liara’s eyes narrowed in concentration when Shepard answered her unvoiced question through the link. {I’ve noticed that too, Li. She’s been unusually quiet most of the day. Something’s up, but I have no idea what. I have to wonder if Riana got news from the Brokerage… or Garrus… and they are trying to decide whether or not to tell us about it.}

Liara gave Sam’s arms a squeeze and forced a smile onto her face. {Well. Here is certainly not the place to be asking those questions. We’ll have to wait until we get back to the complex to ask what is bothering her.}

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And now, here they were with a seemingly reticent Captain Tanni approaching them, a somber expression on her face. “Lady Liara. Captain. Is there something amiss?” Livos’ eyes narrowed in thought as she tried to decipher what could have happened that required her attention… and angry at herself for possibly missing something while her mind wandered amidst a distraction by the name of Carlina V’Zanto.

“No, there is nothing for you to be concerned about… at least regarding Shepard and me.” A concerned Liara reached over and gently laid a hand on the captain’s arm. “Livos, is everything okay? You seem very much… out of sorts… enough so that both of us have noticed.”

“I apologize, Mistress, though I am unsure as to what I have done to cause concern.” Surprised, Livos quickly looked back and forth between the pair. “Though, I will admit to being rather tired today.” Her eyes flicked nervously as she continued, “I… stayed up rather late last night.”

Shepard began to smile and struggled to contain it to no avail. Liara easily picked up on her thoughts as she recalled them going in for bed the night before… and leaving Livos and their guide along at the fire pit. Liara’s eyes opened wide and she had to keep herself from shouting… instead, quietly asking in astonishment, “Did you spend the entire night out by the fire with Carlina V’Zanto?”
Responding without thinking, Livos confirmed their suspicions by asking, “How in the galaxy could you possibly know that?”

Shepard grinned and looked at Liara, reaching over and taking her hand as she answered for them both. “It was nothing more than a good guess, Livos. You were the last two at the pit when we retired last night; I just put one and one together… There’s nothing about that to be embarrassed about or ashamed of; she seems like a very nice person.”

Knowing there had to be more to it, based on Livos’ mood, Liara couldn’t let it rest. “But you are too pensive, Livos, and the two of you have hardly spoken today. Did she do something untoward or unfitting as a resort…”

“Absolutely not! She was simply busy today and I did not want to interrupt her work.” Livos cut Liara off without preamble and then shook her head, a tentative smile creeping onto her lips. “Though… seeing as you have noticed my distraction, I do have something to tell you.”

Shepard looked at Liara, who simply said, “Certainly. I hope you realize you can tell us anything.”

Livos shifted nervously before confessing, “I have discovered something about our guide. We were up very late, talking and doing… other things. She told me about her family… on Illium.” She watched as Liara’s eyes lit with recognition; during her time on Illium as an Information Broker, Liara had eventually learned the names of all the major crime families.

“By the Goddess! She is part of that V’Zanto family?” she asked incredulously. Via the link, Liara quickly filled Shepard in on their criminal activities, ranging from petty theft to the slave trade, money laundering and drugs such as Minagen X3 – often confused with Red Sand because of both its color and biotics-enhancing effects, and a drug Shepard was well acquainted with, thanks to Illium, the Eclipse and a certain Volus drug dealer by the name of Pitne For.

“We are mutually attracted to one another, but I dare not risk our House standing.” Livos’ shoulders slumped. “So, now you understand my dilemma. My heart wants to believe her story, that she left home as soon as she graduated university and could support herself… but my mind tells me I must check her story, to protect the House.”

Shepard nodded knowingly. “So, your heart and head are in conflict, each calling the other a traitor for not believing the other.”

“It is not a matter of belief, Nara. It is a matter of duty.” Livos made direct eye contact with Liara for the first time. “If simply having the name associated with our house brings shame upon it, I cannot follow my heart, no matter how much I may desire it.”

“Have faith, Livos.” Liara smiled reassuringly. “I cannot believe a resort such as the Záhrada S’Vatyne has not completed extensive background checks. I shall ask Riana to check into it for me. We’ll put the query out and we will deal with the results when we get them.” Liara’s smile faded as she continued, “Does Zan know I was an information broker on Illium?”

“I do not think so.” Livos shook her head. “It certainly did not come up last night… and I do not know how I can possibly broach the topic.”

“You don’t have to.” Shepard dropped Liara’s hand and stepped forward. “As Captain of House T’Soni, that’s my job. I will go with you and speak to her about it, but I will also remind you of one thing before we do so.”

Livos looked at her expectantly, her eyes darting and laced with concern. Shepard smiled at the
commando. “Relax, Liv. I simply want to remind you that I gave Maya Brooks, of all people, a second chance. If I believe that woman is redeemable, you have absolutely nothing to worry about, as long as Zan is telling the truth.”

Livos breathed an audible sigh as the features of her face transformed into an expression of relief. “Thank you, Nara. Actually, I had completely forgotten about that… and recalling that event now brings me more comfort than you could possibly know.”

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**Serrice, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 22 Aug 2188**

“The true revolution begins today!” Huntress Sikara Mendaras shouted above the crowd, gathering the attention of those closest to her and causing them to begin shushing the rest. As a cascade of silence swept through those gathered, Mendaras continued, “It has been over a year, and still there is no change of leadership… no reform! The matriarchs in power… those who purposely concealed Prothean technology that could have ended the war sooner… remain in their positions and believe that we shall all be silenced… first by extending martial law, and now with the appointment of a new Minister of Justice, who has been specifically tasked with silencing our movement!”

The crowd murmured in disapproval as more and more passersby stopped and joined their numbers in order to listen in. Someone in the crowd shouted, “So, near the end of the war, many of our sisters died for no reason? If the war had ended even a day sooner, thousands would have been saved!”

“Exactly!” Mendaras nodded. “But, as we speak, those same matriarchs are gathering their forces, securing their positions… They will not police themselves, yet the Galactic Council does nothing! They are too busy yet with war recovery efforts throughout the galaxy to worry themselves over the internal politics of a single world.”

“But what about Tevos?” Another unidentified voice erupted from the mass of bodies. “Have you specifically asked her to bring it before them?”

“Of course we have.” Mendaras shook her head and continued, “As the leader of the Alliance for Change, I sent a request to her… and she did bring it before the Council… but the response she passed on to us was anything but promising. As one of the original three races, the Council is extremely hesitant to deliver charges against our homeworld. They emphasized that our elections are coming up in January… and say that if it is truly how the people of Thessia feel, we will correct our own course when the opportunity arises.” She paused before adding, “So, it seems, any actions we deem necessary are up to us and us alone!”

“But there are Council sanctions that should have been imposed once the hiding of such technology was discovered! It is a matter of law!”

Again, Mendaras nodded. “I realize that… but so do the councilors of the other races. I believe each and every race has technology they are hiding… and are afraid our matriarchs will turn the tables on them by accusing them of the same. We already know for certain the Humans hold Prothean technology and have dabbled in AI… but there have been no sanctions against them, either. And, there is obviously no question the Quarians are also guilty of such things yet, not only did they not get sanctioned, they gained a seat on the Council at the end of the war!”

“So, what are we supposed to do? It sounds as if our options are limited, without support from the Council… it seems we have no choice other than to wait for the annual elections.”

“Apparently, any who contributed to the war effort have been forgiven their previous crimes.”
Mendaras’ head turned toward the newest voice. “So, I propose we simply continue along that line. I believe we can safely assume every race has played the same intelligence game, looking for some sort of advantage over each of the others, and each has information they do not wish to share… As such, we all must forgive one another for the hidden ownership of such technology.”

As the crowd angrily grumbled at her, Mendaras shouted above the din. “Do not read into my words things I do not mean – I am not yet finished! I said to forgive ownership… I said nothing about forgiving them for not sharing that critical information during a time of dire need! In that regard, I believe our eight Defense Ministers knew what they were doing was wrong… and illegal, but still they attempted to save themselves… no, attempted to save their influence and positions… and, by so doing, committed murders in the tens of thousands! An unfathomable quantity of Asari blood… galactic blood… stains their collective hands for every single day they delayed after Spectre Shepard’s request for information was distributed!”

In the offices of the new Serrice Minister of Justice, Matriarch Galalina Niaso stared at her monitor and growled. “That is just about enough of that nonsense.” Raising her omnitool, she keyed in the contact data and spoke abruptly. “End it. Now.”

“On what charge, Minister?”

“Ha!” Galalina curled her lip in distaste. “Take your pick. Congregating without a permit? Unproven accusations and slander against the Defense Ministers? Conspiring to foment rebellion? I don’t care. Just break it up and send them on their way.” She paused as another thought occurred to her. “And any who won’t leave peacefully? Arrest them… by whatever means necessary.”

The newest captain of the rebuilt Serrice Guard hesitated a long moment and then asked, “Are you sure that is what you want us to do, Matriarch?”

“Do not question me, Captain… I was appointed to this position by the Defense Council to clean up this mess before it gained purchase and I damned well intend to do my job. You will do yours as well or you will find yourself among those arrested… and your second will take your place. Is that understood?”

Captain Lydia D’Naga glanced to her right, where her newly appointed second-in-command – Lieutenant Alestia Niaso… and not by the captain’s choice – was standing by for orders. Goddess be damned. If I do not follow her orders, her fucking daughter will likely shoot first, ask questions later… and, I do believe, I am not destined to survive such an encounter. I need to be smart about this. Keying her comm unit, she replied, “Understood, Matriarch.”

She put a neutral expression on her face and turned to her squad officers, relaying the orders. As a couple of them went to protest, she hardened her eyes and glared at them. “Don’t. Not here, not now. If you have issues with any of this, do the job, but bring your objections to me… later. Privately.” She immediately looked pointedly at the younger Asari at her side as she stated, “Lieutenant Niaso is now in charge of this particular operation. Get to it.”

Having gone with the Lieutenant in a failed attempt to keep the operation from getting out of hand, it was two hours later when the captain snapped to attention within the office of the Minister of Justice. Even with three members of the Serrice Guard in the hospital, along with fifteen civilians… and an additional three lying on slabs in the morgue, Matriarch Galalina was unexplainably pleased. “Excellent job, Captain. You did precisely what needed to be done.”
D’Naga gaped at her in astonishment. “Three innocent citizens are dead, Matriarch! How can you consider those results a success?”

Galalina narrowed her eyes at the captain and answered in a quiet voice, balancing on a fine edge between tolerance and accusation. “Because the mob was dispersed… and those three dead Asari will very likely dissuade that rabble from gathering again in such a manner.” She walked up to Lydia until their noses almost touched. “Your only shortcoming was in failing to capture Huntress Mendaras. How, exactly, did she manage to elude you?”

Against her own better judgement, the captain responded contemptuously, “I don’t know, Matriarch. You will have to ask Lieutenant Niaso; she ran the tactical portion of the operation.”

The matriarch’s eyes flashed with unconcealed anger, but she somehow maintained her self-control and kept herself from performing any rash action. Even so, after a couple of deep, calming breaths, she was still only able to manage a seething reply. “Do not test my resolve, Captain D’Naga, or you will most certainly regret ever accepting the position of Captain of the Guard. As such, it is your sworn duty… not the Lieutenant’s… to execute my orders. You do that again and I will throw your ass in prison faster than you can blink… for dereliction of duty and disobeying a direct order.” She spun away and strode angrily to her desk, never turning around as she furiously thundered, “Now, get the fuck out of my office before I have someone throw you out.”
Chapter Notes

*Amantia* - lover (Thessian)

*Anam Cara* - Soul Mate (Gaelic)

*Ardat* - demon (Source: CDN)

QEC - Quantum Entanglement Communicator

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**The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 22 Aug 2188**

Once they had all returned to their woodland retreat, the commando captain met with Liara and Shepard to devise a plan. The very next day, they would head out for a leisurely morning on the sailboat… with the announced purpose of teaching Shepard to sail. In addition to Liara and Samantha, Livos and Zan would also be aboard; their true purpose in having her Personal Guard Captain and the resort guide accompany them was to provide all four of them with a secluded place – while still in plain sight – where they could talk, uninterrupted and without being concerned that other ears might be listening to their discussion.

It wasn’t that they planned on keeping any secrets from the other commandos; it was simply a precaution – to prevent any of those involved from being hurt or embarrassed, should the conversation not go as they all hoped. As soon as it was decided, Livos sought out Zan and told her of the next day’s sailboat outing and, so as to not blindside the guide once they were away from shore, told her the real reason for the outing.

After a moment’s thought, Zan smiled and admitted to looking forward to the excursion, being extremely confident in her position and the truth behind what she had told the commando. Her response was preceded by a shrug, just before she stated, “The time we have available to get to know one another is precious… mainly because it is extremely limited. Seeing as I have nothing to hide, it will be good to get any obstacles to our potential relationship out of the way. As I do not wish to squander any more of it while we await Lady Liara’s decision, the sooner we can have this meeting the better.”

“Good.” Livos cast the captivating Asari a loving smile. “I was afraid you would take offense… or not want to come with us at all.”

“Seriously?” Concealing a smirk by looking away from the commando, Zan had taunted, “We have only just begun, and you are already doubting my commitment to this relationship?”

Livos was readying herself to defend her statement when Zan had glanced back, only to laugh upon seeing Livos’ look of dismay. “Oh… I honestly wish you could see the expression on your face right now, Liv. Goddess! I’m just teasing. Truly, I appreciate the heads-up.” She smiled and reached over, taking the captain’s hand and giving it a quick squeeze of thanks as she continued, “That discussion is not something I would want to walk into unprepared.”

“Nor is it something I would ever intentionally do to you, Zan.” Livos grinned as she pulled her
“hand away to gently punch the shameless guide on the shoulder. “And if this relationship is to have any chance at working, you need to understand that now… sooner, rather than later!”

The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 23 Aug 2188

Once Liara had guided them a reasonable distance off shore, Shepard glanced at Livos, who immediately gave her a nod. Receiving the go-ahead, the Spectre focused on an expectant Carlina V’Zanto and spoke in a measured tone. “Alright then. I understand you have an interest in the captain of Lady Liara’s personal guard. Do you honestly understand the level of scrutiny you will be subjected to during our background check?”

Zan met the woman’s eyes without hesitation and answered steadily, “Absolutely, Spectre. And, as I informed Livos last night, I welcome your inquiry; there is absolutely nothing in my past for which I am ashamed or feel any need to hide.” She glanced at Livos before continuing, “I also have no doubt that Captain Tanni has already informed both of you that my birth mother is the matriarch of a major crime family on Illium.”

Not understanding why Zan would refer to the matriarch in that fashion, Shepard asked, “Your birth mother?” In response, Zan’s eyes flashed with an emotion the human immediately recognized as anger… if not outright hatred.

“She will never be anything more to me than that… and I wish even that was not a truth which I must endure!” Zan’s face flushed as she hissed, “She was a cruel mistress who tolerated no weakness from anyone… especially the one whom she presumed to be the heir to her empire. Her lessons to me revolved solely around surviving a life full of people you could never trust to not stab you in the back… One had to be strong if you wished to live long enough to enjoy the next morning’s sunrise.” She sneered as the painful memories flooded through the gates opened by Shepard’s innocent query and growled, “Welcome to Illium’s underworld.”

Zan dropped her head and continued quietly, as if speaking the long-held secrets too loudly would throw her unceremoniously back into that past life. “If I failed at something, I was whipped; a process I was expected to simply… endure. If I showed either resistance or weakness at any time during the process, I would find myself waking in the infirmary… with every expectation of an immediate return to work.”

She huffed quietly and continued, “She insisted that minutes mattered; a minute early and an operation could be blown… a minute late and people counting on your arrival could end up dead… So, I was also punished if I was the slightest bit late to anything – no matter if it was because I stayed elsewhere to complete whatever task had been previously assigned to me – and, I promise you, Matriarch Clarinda V’Zanto was nothing if not inventive when it came to penalizing those who disappointed her.”

Shepard felt, as well as heard, the gasp of revulsion and sorrow from the Asari behind her on the tiller, so immediately passed on Liara’s thoughts to the guide. “We did not intend for this to bring up such obviously painful memories, Zan… I apologize.”

“That is not necessary, Spectre.” Zan drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly, in order to calm her spiking emotions; she huffed and shook her head. “After three centuries, you would think these things would not upset me anymore… but, sometimes, I simply cannot help it.” A hint of a smile returned to her lips as she continued, “Matriarch Marisha has been more kind to me than anyone in my family ever was. I was barely making ends meet when we first met, with me working at the botanical gardens at the University of Serrice as a tour guide. She was impressed with my passion
for conservation… and it has led to the best two hundred years of my life.”

Shepard smiled in return and allowed herself a little laugh. “I was impressed with your knowledge of the plants and animals here within the resort. Now, I have a better understanding of your motivation for deepening your knowledge of the natural world around you.”

Zan shrugged, “The truth of the matter is that I found my motivation in trying to be everything my birth mother wasn’t.” The look of confusion on the Spectre’s face had her explaining, “That ardat’s goal in life was to eventually own whatever she wanted; her strategy was to decide what was worth taking and then make a plan to do just that… and she ended her unsuccessful attempts by then tearing down anything and everything she could not manage to take as her own. Such… singlemindedness… ensured her success in nearly every endeavor.” Zan then sneered as she finished, “I never saw anyone out-stubborn her in anything… except me.”

“Because she didn’t manage to control you or your life… nor destroy it?” Shepard raised an eyebrow in query.

“Exactly.” Once again, Zan met her gaze and Shepard made note of the deep-seated resolve residing within the Asari’s expression as she continued, “I wrested control of my life from her when I never returned after my secondary education… and once I returned here, to the place I was born, and secured a position at the resort, I knew I had finally found a home. I will never allow her to take that away from me… ever! I swear that on my very life.”

“But…” Livos added hastily, “…What we honestly care about from what we saw and heard during that time is that your name was never mentioned in any of the communiques we read – not once. That lack of presence is what applies to our current discussion; it supports your declaration regarding you not playing any role whatsoever in the family business.”

“Somehow, I believe that, Zan.” Shepard tipped her head slightly to the side as she asked, “Are you aware Liara was an information broker on Illium?”

Zan’s eyes flashed only briefly in surprise and she glanced at Livos before answering cautiously, “No… I was not.” Her gaze briefly traveled to the unassuming Asari sitting at the back of the boat before returning to Shepard. “I know Lady Liara must possess a constitution of titanium to have survived the war as she did, fighting at your side… but I never would have imagined her as an info broker… on Illium of all places!”

“I had my reasons, Zan. Every family has its secrets… and there is much you do not yet know about us.” Liara spoke for the first time since they had set sail. “So, before you have our blessing to become involved with Livos, we must be absolutely sure that we can trust you… but, unlike your mother…” Liara paused and corrected herself before continuing, “… your birth mother… House T’Soni knows how to both trust and properly care for the members of our family.” Her expression turned hard as she said, “I am well aware of the V’Zanto family, their illegal activities, and the trail of bodies they have left in their wake. As an Asari information broker, I refused to do business with them, though I am positive not all my colleagues had the same convictions.”

“But…” Livs added hastily, “…What we honestly care about from what we saw and heard during that time is that your name was never mentioned in any of the communiques we read – not once. That lack of presence is what applies to our current discussion; it supports your declaration regarding you not playing any role whatsoever in the family business.”

“That is largely because of the event with Leona…” Zan paused and glanced between Liara and Shepard… and saw no indication that Livs had passed on that particular tale. When she realized that Livs must have kept that part of the story to herself, Zan explained briefly, “… My one and only amantia when I was younger. The matriarch had her kidnapped as leverage in order to… convince me… to return home; all it did was make me abhor my family even more. Also, because I never warned her what my family was like, Leona hated me as a result, even though I managed to get her released without injury. So… when I turned my back on that life a second time, I was disowned and declared outlaw by my so-called mother. I can never – not safely, anyway – return to
Illium; most likely, anyplace within Tasale would be risky.”

“Be that as it may, I want you to realize I never truly left the information business and still have contacts on Illium… as well as many other locations… and have already reached out to them.” Liara smiled. “So far, they have all confirmed your version of the events in your life, so I see no reason to not move along to the next step of the process.”

Not knowing of Liara’s true position within the information world, Zan had no idea as to the speed with which the Shadow Broker could find what she was searching for. So, unable to keep the surprised grin off her face at the welcome news, Zan asked, “Which is what, Lady Liara?”

“I am confident Matriarch Marisha has completed an extensive background check on you, given the caliber and security requirements for many of the resort’s clientele. I would like to arrange a meeting with her to discuss your employment references… and our potential joined futures.”

“Joined futures?” Zan cocked her head before continuing, “I am not exactly sure what you are referring to, Lady Liara, so I feel I need to clarify that I have absolutely no inclinations toward terminating my position here at the resort. I love my job.”

“Understood, Zan.” Liara smiled softly. “That is not what I meant at all, so you should hold no concerns on that account. What I see between you and Livos shows promise, and I would anticipate you visiting us whenever our schedules permit.” Liara’s smile faded as she continued, “But Livos is the captain of my personal guard and, just as you have no intention of leaving S’Vatyne, I have no intention of replacing my captain, so I will need to work something out with your Matriarch Marisha that is mutually beneficial… to allow your relationship to grow, should that be the path you and Livos choose.”

Once Zan determined that Liara had no intention of compromising her job with S’Vatyne, the entire conversation had ended relatively abruptly… basically, with a simple promise from Zan to ask the matriarch about a meeting with the two war heroes… one Zan felt confident about securing, given their renown throughout the galaxy.

With the morning business – apparently successfully – concluded, Liara had smiled and looked to Shepard. “So, shall we begin your first sailing lesson now?”

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Crossing a body of water in a small craft propelled solely by the power of wind was one of the many skills Samantha Shepard had never thought to learn. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to, necessarily; it was simply that the opportunity to do so had never honestly presented itself. She had missed her one previous chance, when she and Liara had very briefly visited Thessia after the destruction of Sovereign at the Citadel.

Having been born and raised aboard space stations and starships for most of her young life, Samantha had never been near any body of water large enough to even consider such a thing. She had never set foot on a watercraft… nor held a line or tiller in her hand. Yet, here she was, bobbing about in what she considered a rather tiny boat… in the middle of a huge lake… as Liara dropped sail in preparation to switch seats with her, ready to turn Shepard into the captain of the first water-faring vessel she had ever boarded.

Admittedly, much like the day of rock climbing, Liara was a very thorough and patient instructor, explaining everything to Shepard as she performed each task, and repeatedly demonstrated how to read the wind… not only by the telltales attached to the sail and rigging, but by the direction of the ripples and shadows on the water. Shepard found her natural reflexes made it relatively easy to
respond to the pressure on the sail and she quickly found her balance.

Liara laughed joyfully. “By the Goddess, Samantha! Is there anything you can’t conquer?”

“Nope,” the captain said with a confident smile for her Anam Cara. “Not when you’re at my side… as an instructor, a partner… and my bondmate. There’s nothing we can’t do when we’re together, Blue.”

Having the privilege of seeing the couple on a more personal level than anyone outside the T’Soni house normally would, Zan simply relaxed back into her seat and grinned. She gently poked Livos in the ribs with her elbow and whispered, “Are they always this damned cute together?”

“No, they are not.” Livos gave her a knowing, ice-filled glance. “When they are on the battlefield… especially if one or the other has been injured? They are downright terrifying to behold.” Thinking briefly about her captain’s recent kidnapping by Jona Sederis, she concluded, “Don’t ever cross either of them, Zan; you would not believe the carnage I have seen one rain down upon an enemy in defense of the other.”

Serrice Government Building, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 24 Aug 2188

Justicar Grand Matriarch Sellyna rose slowly from her chair and offered a dignified nod to the governesses seated before her. “Thank you for accepting my request to speak to all of you today.” Her eyes traveled the table, pausing only a moment on the vacant chair previously occupied by the Kendra Ocean Governess, Luesia N’Tori. She finished her scan and returned her eyes to the current head of the Governance Forum, Matriarch Cyla of Serrice. “I have two points of business to bring to your attention today. First, the resolution of the inquiry into the acts of Matriarch Luesia of Kendra Ocean.”

The Asari seated around the table stirred uncomfortably, causing Cyla to rap a small gavel on the table. “Quiet please. Let the Grand Justicar say her peace.”

Chastised, the group fell silent, allowing the Justicar to continue. “While her methods were found to be in direct violation of the law, we determined her cause to be just. That being said, however, we also agreed the status of the war against the Reapers, at the time of the Isle Nation Compact, provided rather… unusually… extenuating circumstances; the fear for their very survival driving the subject matriarchs to extremes we believe they would not have otherwise taken.”

She let out a long sigh and shook her head. “As we spoke to each signatory, most agreed it was a wartime contingency plan that no longer applied… Those then offered a signed statement of withdrawal from the Compact and submitted themselves to the mercy of Justicar judgment.”

Cyla cleared her throat in the sudden silence and queried, “What, exactly does that mean, Justicar? Did you come to any resolution or sentence regarding their actions?”

“We find it difficult to find any fault with their acts of desperation.” Sellyna’s glance quickly swept the table and she continued, “But I have come here to offer a proposal, should you desire to hear it.”

“Goddess, yes,” a relieved Cyla blurted. “By all means, please! We will accept any suggestions or guidance you are willing to contribute. We have conversed over this issue for hours and have yet to reach any substantive conclusions regarding their punishment.”

The Justicar dropped her head in a weak attempt to hide the smile that inadvertently climbed onto her face at the unashamed confession from the head of the Governance Forum. They are always so...
unwilling to punish their own; it is likely that each fears she could be next. Raising her head to once more face her eager listeners, Sellyna began. “Our first recommendation is to suspend the voting privileges of the unrepentant for a full year, as punishment for their illegal act, those parties include the Kendra Ocean Defense Minister and the signing representative from Ressent, Matriarch Mahali T’Gallia.”

Pausing briefly, until she recognized acceptance in the eyes of forum members, Sellyna continued, “Our second recommendation is to prohibit Matriarch Luesia N’Tori from ever again holding any form of public office, even in an advisory capacity, as she demonstrated an appalling lack of remorse or any attempt at explanation when confronted with her crime within this forum. Her post-crisis words and actions demonstrated nothing but blatant contempt for accepted Asari procedural law.”

Seeing not even a hint of disagreement on the faces before her, Sellyna pressed ahead. “Our final recommendation regarding this issue echoes a suggestion already proposed by Matriarch Cyla, during last month’s Forum meeting. At a minimum, you need to extend an invitation to the Isle Republics to join as junior members of the Forum; this would, at the very least, give them a voice regarding issues at hand, which is only fair… given their status as legal citizens within the Asari Republics.”

Cyla smiled and nodded. “We agree on that point, Justicar, and have already decided – assuming all goes well over a trial period of one year – that we will give them voting power as well. We will simply change our voting process to a weighted system, reflecting current registered occupants of each city-state. Thessia does this now for all general elections, so the process already exists; we simply need to adopt it as the accepted voting process for the Forum as well.”

Sellyna closed her eyes and dipped her head in a show of approval. As she once again raised her head, she opened her eyes and replied, “I must admit I find such a forward-thinking resolution from you is unexpected, and I approve of such a change. It will go a long way toward assuaging their concerns of non-representation.”

“Thank you for your service in this matter, Justicar Sellyna.” Cyla looked around the table; observing that each of the other governesses were nodding in approval, she continued, “I believe it safe to say this matter is ready to move to the next step. We will draft the invitation this very session.”

“You are most welcome.” Surprising the Forum members, Sellyna made no move to stand. “If you recall, I did mention that I have two points of business to discuss today.” Her eyes focused on the head of the forum. “The second item concerns the Serrice Minister of Justice, Matriarch Galalina Niaso, newly appointed by Defense Minister Rahula N’Atchelle, whose actions regarding the concealment of Prothean Technology, in violation of Council Law, are already under investigation.”

“Goddess spare me.” Cyla squeezed her eyes shut as if she was experiencing the sudden onset of a severe headache. “What has she done now?”

Without a trace of humor, Sellyna asked, “Which? Galalina or Rahula?”

Following a heavy sigh, Cyla clarified, “I was speaking of Rahula… but, either one, I suppose.” She shook her head lightly in disgust and huffed, “Please. Do tell, so we can get this over with.”

Sellyna canted her head in question as she continued, “Three of your citizens are dead, Cyla, as a result of an unjustifiable assault on, as far as I can tell, a peaceful gathering in a public square, by order of Matriarch Galalina.” She paused, seeing the look of shocked surprise on the face of the Governess of Serrice, before adding. “It happened only yesterday, so I do not fault you for not yet knowing of it, although it certainly makes me question the efficacy of your staff reporting and why
they did not deem this information important enough to relay to you before this meeting.”

“I… I know nothing of this but, rest assured, I will find out soon enough!” Not thinking about who she was speaking to, Cyla growled, “Tell me what you know, Justicar!”

Given the subject of discussion, Sellyna took no offense and immediately relayed the facts, as she understood them, to the dumbfounded Governance Forum.

“How did you first hear of this?” Angry tears slipped down the cheeks of the Serrice Governess, who made no attempt to wipe them away in her state of disgust. “That my staff has not relayed this news to me… at the very least, it is an unspeakable lapse of judgment… at the worst, dereliction of duty!”

“No, Governess.” Sellyna shook her head. “At the very worst, it is an act of sedition.” The shock on Cyla’s face urged the Justicar to continue. “If your staff has been coopted by the Defense Minister and they are purposely withholding this breach of citizen’s rights from you… it is no less than treason.”

The look of shock shifted swiftly to one of fury as Cyla rose slowly from her chair; her voice shaking with a menacing edge as she leaned forward and placed her hands, beginning to glow slightly with biotic power, upon the table. She growled, “I formally request Justicar support in the removal of both of the persons in question… Minister Rahula N’Atchelle and Matriarch Galalina Niaso. At a minimum, I want them both charged with conspiracy to commit murder, resulting in the death of three Asari citizens. I am sure Galalina acted willingly, upon illegal orders from Rahula so, for that, she will also be charged with dereliction of duty.”

She was shaking with anger as she continued on her rant, “As for Rahula… If the Council will take no action, then I shall. I also want her charged with dereliction, because of her failure to produce the critical information from the Prothean beacon in Thessia’s hour of greatest need. Had it not been for Counselor Tevos’ bravery in revealing its location to Spectre Shepard, it is very possible we would not be having this conversation today!”

Sellyna had risen as Cyla spoke and bowed her head briefly in acknowledgement, once the governess finally stopped speaking. “You understand this requires a Forum vote before I can undertake such a task, do you not?”

Without waiting for Cyla to respond, Matriarch Falis S’Treuss of Dassus chimed in, “We are well aware, Justicar. But, before we vote, I wish to add the name of my Defense Minister, Eleria T’Saptos, to the list for dereliction of duty. Her primary job is to protect the citizens within our city-state… not her personal secrets, agenda or job. Eleria…” Her eyes wandered the table as she continued, “… they all held back information essential to our victory over the Reapers.” She drew a deep breath and added, “So, I am with Cyla, if the Council will do nothing, I will. Charge them.”

One by one, the governesses added the names of their Defense Ministers to the list until the only one who had remained silent was Niana T’Relvos of Majesa. “I am not so convinced all are guilty. Many did not have communications, so did not know of the request.” She stared at the Justicar, her eyes hard. “I will add the name of Trellani S’Phessi only if you promise me you will treat each as individuals, and not the Defense Forum as a unit.” She shook her head lightly and huffed, “I have asked Tré if she knew of it… and, between my questions and your investigation regarding the illegal sale of Asari weapons to mercenaries, I have never seen a matriarch so… broken.”

Sellyna nodded in agreement. “I believe what you say is true, but to avoid favoritism, the Order must investigate all… or none.” She smiled grimly as she continued, “And we will discover the truth; after which only the guilty will be punished. As we investigate, I charge the Governess Forum
with the task of determining a punishment you feel appropriate to the crime.”

Having calmed down over the duration of the discussion, Cyla spoke once more, in a voice much more controlled and even than her previous words. “Agreed… though I do not believe that one punishment will fit all. We must determine the length of time each held that secret after learning of the need. I feel the longer the time, the harsher the repercussions for their lack of action.”

The Justicar stood from her chair and bowed. “Any recommendations you have will be welcomed, but I feel I must state that, since you are relinquishing the investigation to the Justicar Order, we will have final authority over the determination of guilt and the resultant punishment. Is this agreeable to all of you?”

Cyla glanced around the table to see only nods of acquiescence. Rising to meet the Justicar, she also bowed. “Agreed, Justicar Sellyna. May the Goddess guide your judgment.”

The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort Offices, Sanves, Ialessa System – 25 Aug 2188

As they were escorted without preamble into the main offices of the resort control center, it became obvious the matriarch was eagerly awaiting their arrival. Upon entering her personal office spaces, Matriarch Marisha eagerly opened her own door to meet them in the lobby, bowing deeply. As she returned to her upright stance, her face held an awed smile as she stated, “Spectre Shepard. Lady Liara. It is my privilege to welcome such honored war heroes to the Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort. You have no idea how much I relished the invitation for such a meeting… For my part, I refrained from personally greeting you upon your arrival so as to not infringe upon your desired privacy during your stay with us. I imagine such periods are extremely rare for you… so I will admit to being much more than pleasantly surprised by your request. Please, do come in.” She stepped to the side and lifted her arm, indicating they should precede her into the office.

Liara, blushing lightly at the matriarch’s deference, replied, “Please. Matriarch. The honor is ours. I know you must be extremely busy… and to have accepted our request so quickly…” She paused and shook her head, smiling. “I have to wonder how many appointments you had to shift around to accommodate us on such short notice. Thank you.”

“Pshh.” The matriarch’s happy smile never left her face. “My staff is quite capable of handling our other visitors and I honestly enjoyed having an excuse to cancel a couple of appointments with our more… demanding… guests.” She smirked as she queried, “Is that horrible of me?”

“Absolutely not!” Shepard laughed. “I imagine you would enjoy a couple of my stories, which horrified poor Liara at the time, of me prematurely… terminating… QEC discussions with the Council during my search for Saren and the Geth.”

Marisha’s eyes opened wide as she exclaimed in disbelief, “You did not!”

Liara, eyes rolling at the memories, replied, “Oh, yes; she most definitely did… more than once!” She suddenly grinned and looked over at her bondmate as she continued, “Though, there was one time when she cut off Sparatus in mid-sentence… which I must admit was particularly satisfying to me.”

After laughing briefly, Marisha guided them to a very comfortable looking seating area where a low, centralized table held snacks and drinks. “The honor truly is mine; you have no idea as to the role you played in our being here today… outside of the obvious, of course.” She paused as she picked up a pitcher of iced Thessian tea and poured three glasses, after looking up to see nods of approval
from her guests. “At the very early stages of the war, I received a communique from Sha’ira, warning me of your visions… at which point I immediately began working with my staff to develop contingency plans. When I then received instructions from Counselor Tevos… which your father had sent her, along with a request to forward them to every matriarch on her communications system… we put those plans into action.”

She ran a hand nervously over her crest, her hand shaking at the dreadful memories. “We went totally dark. This main resort section was completely shut down and we dispersed throughout the resort, to every hidey-hole and remote location within our 400 square kilometer borders. Those instructions saved us all, Liara, when the Reapers came calling to Sanves. Many a city on this world was laid waste… but we survived, with only minimal damage. The Reapers took no interest in darkened shelters with no signs of life. We owe that to you and your father.”

“Goddess! I had no idea my father made such efforts to spread the word so widely. She never said anything to me of her actions beyond Thessia.”

Liara glanced at Shepard who simply shrugged and grinned. “We should have known better. Aethyta isn’t one to sit on her ass when something needs doing.”

Marisha nodded in agreement. “Most definitely… a role model for other matriarchs, perhaps?” She paused before adding, “Knowing this is your honeymoon, I find myself reluctant to bring this up… but are you aware of what is currently transpiring on Thessia?”

Liara raised a brow marking in question as she said, “We have been cut off from the news… on purpose, of course… Is this something that you believe to be of great import?”

“Only if you consider this morning’s announcement significant… which I do.” Marisha paused; after taking a sip of tea in order to collect her thoughts, she continued in a quietly somber tone. “Each of the defense ministers on the home world has been indicted for deliberate dereliction of duty… due to their collective refusal to aid the war effort by releasing the location of the Prothean beacon at the Temple of Athame in Serrice.”

“Gods be damned!” Shepard almost jumped up from her chair, barely catching herself and planting herself back in the seat before rising more than a few centimeters. Liara’s response was nearly the same; her actions were tempered only by her surprise at Samantha’s loud exclamation.

“That is significant news, indeed!” Liara had to resist the temptation to immediately open her omnitool and place a query with the Broker staff. “I have to wonder what finally prompted such action.”

“There was a demonstration in Serrice… completely peaceful, from what I understand… in preparation for the January elections, to which the newly appointed Minister of Justice, under orders from the Defense Minister, reacted rather… violently.” Marisha shook her head in disgust. “Three citizens ended up dead, fifteen were injured severely enough to require hospitalization, along with three members of the Serrice Guard. The Governance Forum made a formal request to the Justicar Order for immediate action. The Serrice ministers were subsequently arrested on multiple charges – the worst being conspiracy to commit murder – and every single Defense Minister was suspended, pending investigation. As one might expect, the Ministry is currently in chaos.”

Liara sank back onto the couch in complete shock. Blinking as her mind processed the rather unexpected and most unwelcome news, she finally managed to respond, “I was beginning to question if such actions would ever be taken… some form of punishment for their withholding of Prothean technology… but I never anticipated it happening in such an explosive manner, should it finally come to pass! May the Goddess – and the Justicars – take pity on their souls.”
T’Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 26 Aug 2188

Tali’Zorah vas Knight Shade had spent most of her waking hours during the previous four days analyzing the design plans for the Nalotir, the Cerberus designed vessel employed by rogue Quarians being led by Admirals Han’Gerrel and Daro’Xen. Fortunately, the ship had been constructed by Cord-Hislop Aerospace; the Alliance Military, having declared Cerberus a traitorous, terrorist organization at war’s end, had seized all of the organization’s assets that could be recovered, including Cord-Hislop’s design data-files for their entire product line, from advanced A-61 heavy gunships, to the original blueprints for the Normandy SR-2, to design specs for extremely limited production warships, of which only three or four of any one example were ever meant to be constructed.

The Nalotir had been completed in the waning days of the war; by the time the ship was launched, Jack Harper had turned his full attention to controlling the Reapers by whatever means necessary. In the end, all his grand designs for the machine race were abruptly halted by a bullet fired by his top assassin, Maya Brooks. The Nalotir, having been flown after launch to the Exodus Cluster by a skeleton crew, was left drifting aimlessly when that crew, having been indoctrinated by the Reapers, all died as a result of the red wave that engulfed the galaxy.

Quarians from the heavy-fleet, on their way from the Local Cluster after helping to defend the Human’s home world from the Reapers, discovered the drifting ship in the Utopia System and placed a salvage team on board. Finding the ship occupied only by deceased Cerberus crew, the Quarians decided it was unnecessary to inform anyone that they had recovered a Cerberus vessel, based on pre-war salvage laws, assumed to still be in effect. The salvage team decided to put the Human corpses to rest by simply ejecting them into space near the system’s first planet, Arcadia.

If the Alliance Navy had been aware of just how well-armed and well-armored the Nalotir really was, they might have attempted to reclaim the Human vessel. However, their first priority was simply keeping those that still lived fed, clothed and sheltered; the post-war reality as it was, they were stretched thin and did not have the manpower to chase a reclamation claim they would likely lose.

Once Tali had gleaned as much information as she could about the former Cerberus vessel, she wanted to discuss her findings with someone more knowledgeable about overall ship designs, especially as it concerned weapons. She moved to the secure communications terminal and sent a request to the Night Shadow.

“Tali’Zorah! How wonderful to see you.” Judea Voni’s smile was contagious, causing Tali to smile behind her tinted visor. “How are things on the Knight Shade?”

“Everything is great, Judea. We’ve… at least, the teams have… been running drills. As for myself, I’ve been studying the specs for the raider targeting the Turian’s freight transports – you do know they’re stealing food. It doesn’t look good, Jude.” Tali uploaded the Nalotir’s specs to the Night Shadow. “Would you mind taking a look for me? Cerberus put some serious thought into their stealth designs, and the ship’s weapons wouldn’t be out of place on a heavy destroyer or light cruiser.”

The Asari looked down as her equipment retrieved the files Tali had sent while the Quarian continued speaking. “What really concerns me is their directed-energy weapons. It would not pose any threat to a hardened target, such as the Normandy or the Night Shadow, but at short range? It
could conceivably fuse the electrical systems of the inexpensively constructed freight haulers most companies are using these days.”

Judea nodded in understanding as she studied the data concerning the particle beam weapon. “Judging from the energy requirements for this thing, it would not be capable of rapid repeat firing, and its effective range would be relatively short, roughly 300 klicks.”

Tali nodded, saying, “It would be nice if the Turians could disable and capture that ship. It’s only been targeting Turian freighters, so far. I haven’t heard of any attacks on the liveships that remained with the civilian fleet, but I wouldn’t put anything past those two admirals. Bosh’tets; both of them!”

“Tali… if I can detect any weaknesses, but I will need a bit of time.”

Behind her mask, Tali’s smile could not be seen by the Asari pilot, but Judea could hear it in Tali’s voice as she signed off. “Thanks for looking at this, Judea. Between us, we should be able to come up with a plan to counteract this thing.”
The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort Offices, Sanves, Ialessa System – 25 Aug 2188

“Given the lengths to which Rahula and Galalina were willing to go to protect their secrets… and their positions… I do not believe either pity or mercy is deserved.” Marisha took another sip of her tea before continuing, “Some form of action has been warranted for a long time and, at this point, I fully expected the opposition to use the elections, rallying the voters to depose those whom had broken trust. As for the part played by the Serrice Guard… to conduct such a violent attack against a peaceful call to action? That is totally inexcusable!”

“I have a feeling that since no adverse action was taken right away, the ministers were all beginning to believe there would be no repercussions regarding the illegal concealment of the Prothean technology.” Shepard’s eyes were hard as she spoke, reflecting her simmering anger at what the Defense Ministers’ lack of action had almost cost them – the loss of everything and everyone had the Reapers not been defeated. “The demonstration must have really hit a nerve for the matriarchs to react so… thoughtlessly.”

“On the contrary,” the matriarch answered quickly. “That is what worries me most; the matriarchs should have expected the rally, for that is how Asari traditionally handle such matters. It should have come as no great surprise to them. As such, the violent answer to the gathering must have been planned. The intent and forethought that must have been present only exacerbates their crimes and demonstrates just how tenuous the Defense Ministers believe their positions to be in the wake of the war, even after all this time.”

Liara, still recovering from the shock of Marisha’s original announcement, asked, “And what of the Governance Forum? I can see them supporting action against those in Serrice… but the entire Ministry?”

“I know many will see that as a reach, but once you truly understand the operations within the differing forums, I do not think you will find such a thing so surprising. Each forum has its own little slice of power… and most are loath to share it.” Marisha sighed sadly. “Cyla requested the charges
be brought against Rahula… not just for the incident, but for treason as well… for the withholding of Prothean technology. I suppose, in her anger, she decided that if the Justicars were going to be investigating, they may as well take care of everything all at once. After that, the idea of a full inquiry apparently gathered momentum and the other governesses gradually began to add their ministers’ names to the list.”

“But all of them?” Shepard shook her head in denial. “With the state of communications at the time, I cannot believe each of them not only had knowledge of our query, but also still possessed the means with which to answer it.”

“It is not only that.” Liara shook her head in disgust. “It may sound cynical, but I have to wonder how many were angry because of the concealment itself… or, on the other hand, because they weren’t deemed important enough to have the information shared with them to begin with.” She glanced at Shepard. “I remember how angry I was, as a lead Prothean expert, to discover that information had been withheld from me; they could simply be looking for retribution.”

“Perhaps you are more savvy in the political realm than I give you credit for, Liara.” Marisha smiled at the young Asari as she continued, “The Justicars believe the same… and not everyone who was there willingly added names to the list… but, in order to avoid the appearance of playing favorites, the Justicar stated that her Order will examine the circumstances surrounding all of them … but will formally charge only the guilty once their investigation is complete.”

Shepard picked up on the nuance and interjected, “And I get the feeling the governesses had better be squeaky clean… or they are going to get caught by their own net.” She frowned and continued, “I find it difficult to accept that none of them knew of the beacon.”

“I agree.” Liara glanced at her Siame and added, “There are very detailed records on when communications were lost to each of the planets… and to each of the districts on Thessia. Also, each buoy keeps operational logs, back-ups of which are transmitted on a daily basis to the main storage facilities in each of the eight primary districts.”

“Yes.” Marisha nodded in agreement. “And now, with the Justicars looking, it will be nearly impossible to hide any of that information… assuming such actions were not already taken and the incriminating records destroyed.”

“Oh… rest assured, Matriarch.” Liara cast her a knowing smile. “Back-ups exist in many places beyond where one might think, assuming one knows where to find them… and I will absolutely ensure they get located by the Order.”

“Ah, yes, that reminds me.” Marisha leaned forward and poured herself another glass of tea before directing her gaze at Liara. “Zan gave me the most surprising little bit of news… that you were an Information Broker on Illium.” The matriarch’s smile faded. “In my profession, trust is sacred. People’s secrets are their own, to be jealously guarded by those who are deemed trustworthy enough to have them shared. Normally, we do not look kindly upon those who profit from dealing in such confidences, but it is my understanding that Justicar Samara granted you clemency for your acts. She must have had a compelling reason to do so… and her decision was backed by the Grand Matriarch of the Order, so that is good enough for me.”

Liara’s own smile vanished like a puff of smoke. “I do not believe you know the full truth of what happened during that time… so, to demonstrate the respect and trust I hope to develop between us, I shall tell you something which you will likely deem an incredulous story… fiction worthy of a sensationalized vid, but I assure you it is not.” Her hand crept over and tightly gripped that of her Anam Cara as she continued, “Most believe Shepard became involved in a deep undercover operation… that she worked for Cerberus for three years after Sovereign’s destruction at the Citadel.
In truth, she was lost when the Normandy SR-1 was destroyed by a then unknown enemy over Alchera.” Her voice hitched slightly as her mind instantly returned to the large shuttle bay of the SSV Madrid; seeing this, Sam sent love and support through the link. Liara glanced at her Amantia, swallowed the lump in her throat and continued, “The Alliance abandoned her out of fear… fear of whatever it was that could have discovered and destroyed a stealth ship like the Normandy.”

She continued with her story, purposely leaving out a number of salient details regarding her involvement in her Siame’s recovery, knowing it would raise questions she was unwilling to answer. “It was Cerberus who contracted for the search and arranged for her rescue… and somehow nurtured her horribly mutilated body back to health over a two-year period – a time during which she had to be kept in a medically induced coma.” A single tear trickled down Liara’s cheek, causing Shepard to gently squeeze her hand again, both comforting her and giving her the determination to continue. “At the time, I knew of none of this. My heart was shattered, my spirit broken… and I felt lost… and desperate. In my misery, I joined the ranks of the information brokers… simply in an attempt to locate Shepard’s remains and bring closure to my agony.”

Liara’s eyes began to glisten from the salty water brought forth by the excruciating memories that swept through her mind. “Yet, something inside me kept insisting that Samantha would not abandon me so, until I found proof… until I located her body… I simply refused to believe she was truly gone. Sha’ira is my witness; those two years were the most horrible ones of my life.” A tearful smile replaced the grimace and she gazed lovingly at the woman beside her as she finished her explanation. “The depths of my despair were transformed into extreme happiness when a dear friend managed to get word to me that Samantha was very much alive.”

“Still, I was wary; I was told of her employment by Cerberus and I did not understand how she could work for such an organization… unless she felt that she owed them for saving her life. As I later discovered, Shepard had approached the Council and the Alliance once she awakened… and they had the utter audacity… and disrespect, to threaten her with arrest if she entered Citadel space. At that point, she made a decision; working with the assets and support of Cerberus had to be better for the cause than sitting in a prison cell, even if it would likely end with her branded as a traitor. The Collectors simply posed too great a threat for us to turn our backs.”

Liara’s eyes, staring at a point off in the distance, shifted suddenly to refocus sharply on the matriarch, only to see the expected look of bewilderment on Marisha’s face. A cool hand gently squeezed her own as Liara concluded in a soft voice edged in steel. “Once we were reunited and she told me the whole story, we discussed it and decided it would be best for both of us to stay in the field… her with Cerberus and me using my new position and influence as a broker to garner information for the war effort. It seemed the wisest choice, no matter how disconcerting on the personal level… for both of us.”

“By the Goddess!” Marisha finally found her voice. “You are correct… had I not lived through the terror of the war, there is no way I would find even a kernel of reality in such a tale. Yet, given who you are… who you have become… I find I must accept it as truth, no matter how outrageous it sounds.”

“You would not be the first to deny us, Matriarch.” Shepard scoffed, “The Alliance Defense Committee never did accept my story as true… not even when the Reapers landed on Earth and killed them all. Very similar to the story of the Asari… too little and, for the Committee, definitely too late. A lot of people died because our leadership didn’t want to believe… or were afraid to do so.”

“This may sound like a horrible thing to say, Shepard… but, at least, your Committee did not survive to continuously perpetuate their denials. They were eliminated so your battle for victory could truly
Marisha sighed quietly. “It was months yet before our matriarchs began to get nervous enough to let something slip… which was fortunately overheard and reported… and then finally passed to you via Raesia Tevos.” The matriarch suddenly shook herself and put a smile back on her face, continuing, “But enough talk of the horrid past when you are here to speak of the bright futures we now have, thanks to you!”

“Yes! Livos and Zan!” Liara’s expression immediately brightened. “In all the years I have known Livos, I have never seen her like this… which tells me this relationship is something very special to her, so I would like to do everything I can to encourage it; I owe her that much, at the very least! I assume Zan has your full confidence and there is nothing I should worry about?”

“Outside of her family? No.” Marisha growled, “But the Illium V’Zanto family is the lowest of the low, which I am sure you know better than I.”

“Yes… but I also know Zan’s version of her past is the truth, so am completely unconcerned.” Liara shrugged dismissively, but her blue eyes were cold as ice. “The V’Zanto family will be taken care of, immediately and with great prejudice, should they decide to take any untoward action. I promise you that.”

Marisha started to speak, then stopped, her eyes wandering toward Shepard. “I suppose having a Spectre in the family should be enough to dissuade a normal criminal from doing anything blatant, but I would still advise caution. If Clarinda V’Zanto hears of this, I have no ideas regarding the harm she would choose to deliver…” The matriarch paused as a worried frown slipped across her lips. “Not all damages are possible to recover from. I do not know the true boundary for her evil deeds and would hate to see a successful attack of a nature that is… irreversible.”

“Such as an assassination?” Her mouth twitching in irritation, Shepard looked at Liara and stated, “Perhaps, as a Spectre, I need to start my peacetime term by establishing a watch network, monitoring the major criminal families within the Traverse and Terminus systems. Wouldn’t want them expanding their activities into vulnerable, post-war Council space now, would we?”

“Where the Council would do nothing, leaving each world to take care of themselves as they hide behind their rule to not interfere with the operations of each race’s sovereign government.” Liara paused and Shepard took the opportunity to jump in. “Which is what they are supposed to do… normally. The Council Charter dictates they pass judgement on violations of Council law, settle disputes between sovereign states, and help maintain general law and order – the last of which leaves them unconditional authority for the use of force when necessary, through the Council Fleet… and the Spectres.”

“Yes… and somehow, no matter how hard we try, we always end up speaking of galactic politics instead of Zan and Livos!” Liara chuckled and glanced at Marisha. “Which, if we can get back on topic, is a relationship I assume you have no objection to?”

Joining in the laughter, Marisha nodded. “Yes, your assumption is correct.” Her smile dwindled as she continued, “I met Zan at probably one of the lowest points in her life; she was shielded… yet vulnerable. Her mother had crushed her heart into something I feared was irreparable… and then, without warning, she comes to me, gushing about Captain Tanni and, even though she is not my daughter, asking me to meet with you regarding a linking of our houses!”

Liara dipped her head and responded quietly, “Perhaps it is not my place to say this… but she confessed to us that you are more a mother to her than Clarinda… that you have been more kind than anyone in her entire family ever was.”

Shepard added, “She is as devoted to you as any consort’s disciple could be, Matriarch. You have
earned her complete trust… and her love; it speaks greatly of the type of person you are.”

Marisha actually blushed. “I am very much aware of how dedicated she is to her job… and that she
serves me well and faithfully… but I had no idea it extended to such a personal level. That is…
humbling.”

“Seeing as neither you nor Liara see any reason to block such a relationship,” Shepard smiled softly
and continued, “I guess the only real question is how we arrange our schedules to give them a decent
chance at making it work?”

“I will say this.” A wide smile graced Marisha’s face as she spoke. “Any time you find yourselves
in the area, you are welcome to stop in… and stay, if you need time, or simply some privacy, away
from Thessia.” Their omnitools lit up as the matriarch typed and continued, “We always keep a
couple of the remote sites open for… emergencies. Simply give me at least a few hours advance
notice, preferably just prior to you making your final relay jump to the Parnitha Relay, if at all
possible. I’ll have your reservations and entry corridor ready and waiting for your arrival.”

“That is most gracious of you.” Liara closed her eyes and took a deep breath as the idea settled into
her mind. Someplace to hide away from the galaxy, even if for only a night or two at a time? There
are definite benefits to such an arrangement. “And, of course, should you ever find yourself
traveling to Thessia, you are welcome to stay at either of our houses… any time you need or desire.
We can easily provide transportation… and a security detail as well, should one be required.” She
glanced at Shepard, who was nodding in agreement.

“As for scheduling our future encounters, now that I think about it, I suppose we should wait until I
resume my Spectre duties… and we reacquaint ourselves with the status of the galaxy and the
demands of the Council.” A lopsided grin slipped onto her face. “I’m sure they have all kinds of
things they are expecting us to do upon our return to real life.”

The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 25 Aug 2188

After their meeting with Matriarch Marisha, they had returned to their primary vacation complex to
stretch out by the pool and fill everyone in on what had transpired… on both the status of Livos and
Zan and the disturbing news they had received regarding the events in Serrice. The general reaction
from the commandos was one of disturbed anger – that fellow commandos, particularly those with a
reputation like the one held by the Serrice Guard, could perpetrate such an illegal… and violent act
against their fellow citizens.

They all sat and ate together, having a long discussion about the war and how it had obviously
changed everyone, turning many into pure survivalists, at any cost, and how it could possibly take a
very long time for things to return to what most considered normal. Riana had shaken her head in
disbelief. “I am unsure exactly what normal is anymore.” She had then unexpectedly grinned at
Livos and totally changed the course of the evening’s conversation as she said, “Especially if Liv is
actually going to have a true amantia! What is that all about?”

The evening slipped away quickly after that, the mood much lighter than they had anticipated after
sharing the news about Serrice. It was now late, and Shepard sat in quiet contemplation as the
commandos slowly wandered off to their rooms. Liara was pacing slowly back and forth in front of
the fireplace in the den as she typed on her omnitool and, while the Spectre didn’t know for sure, she
had a good idea what the Asari was doing. Samantha rose slowly from her chair and intercepted her
Ionuín Alainn as she walked. “Liara. I distinctly recall you taking my omnitool from me when you
catched me working.”
Startled by Shepard’s unexpected appearance, the Asari stopped abruptly and looked up guiltily with a sigh. “You are correct. I did.” She huffed in reluctance and moved to shut her omnitool off, but Shepard reached over and gently intercepted the blue hand with her own.

“Don’t, Liara.” The woman smirked as confusion swept through the link. “We’re quite the pair, aren’t we? It’s our honeymoon and we cannot find it within ourselves to simply not work. We’re just too damned dedicated… but it’s more than what we do; it’s who we are. Neither one of us will be content until this matter is resolved, so why don’t we take a vow right now to relax for the rest of the night. Tomorrow? We’ll start our morning with a trip out to the Aletheia. You get on the Broker terminal and call Miranda and I’ll get on the comm terminal and talk to Tevos and we’ll figure out our next steps.

“Even if that means returning early to Thessia?” Liara’s brow wrinkled in consternation.

“Oh, I very much believe that is exactly what’s going to happen, Blue.” Shepard huffed with a small laugh and continued, “I’m actually amazed we survived ten days without working…” She grinned. “Well… mostly, anyway. I have to admit that I broke first.”

“Yes… but my break will result in the end of our honeymoon, won’t it?” Liara’s shoulders slumped in defeat as she sadly looked down at the floor.

Laughing aloud, Shepard wrapped the distraught Asari in her arms and hugged her tight. Kissing her gently on the cheek, she whispered in her ear, “No, Grá mo chroí. While the acts of the Serrice Guard, the Defense Ministers and the Governesses may result in us returning to Thessia a bit earlier than planned, that does not necessarily mean our honeymoon is over. We can work part time from home and simply provide… interim guidance… to those eagerly awaiting our return to service. Tevos hasn’t called us, so it can’t be that bad, can it?”

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Aletheia, The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves – 26 Aug 2188

First thing in the morning, the honeymooners took the Maglev out to the Aletheia and placed the necessary calls, with Liara calling Miranda and Judea first. After being filled in on the greater-than-expected capabilities of the rogue Quarian fleet, Shepard decided that they very much needed to contact the Council, and promptly made the next call. Tevos’ worried face appeared almost immediately on the screen and, before even bothering to say hello, blurted out, “Shepard! What has happened?”

Completely caught off guard by the abrupt greeting… or question as was truly the case… Shepard blinked a couple of times before answering, “You tell me, Councilor. Have the people of the galaxy gone insane since Liara and I left for our honeymoon? We’re hearing rather distressing news from Serrice… and have absolutely no idea how desperate Xen and Gerrel are becoming out in the Rim, so figured that we should check in.”

“By the Goddess, Shepard! Do not ever do this to me again. You are supposed to be on your honeymoon!” She glanced away for a moment; after obviously referring to some form of calendar, she returned her gaze to her caller. “For another five days, at the least!”

The Spectre grinned and replied calmly, “And you can pass on to Sha’ira that we’ve been having a wonderful time here.” She chuckled lightly and shrugged as she stated, “But, you should know by now that it’s nearly impossible for either Liara or me to just sit around when we know there’s something that needs doing.” Her expression turned somber as she went on, “We’ve purposely been avoiding the news since we got here, but we finally had the opportunity to meet Matriarch Marisha
yesterday, in person, and she passed on the information regarding recent events.”

“I will have to speak with Sha’ira about that. I thought we had made it perfectly clear you were not to be disturbed with business of that sort while you were there… because I do know you and feared exactly this.” Tevos appeared rather chagrined at the development. “You and Liara deserve this time, Shepard; do us all a favor and enjoy the last few days of your honeymoon. Please?”

Shepard shook her head. “Sorry, Councilor, but it’s impossible to unlearn or ignore what we’ve heard.”

“No, it is not… but give it a couple more days, at least.” Tevos’ face was an expressionless mask, keeping herself in check and exhibiting a level of control normally reserved for sensitive negotiations, not a conversation with one whom she considered a dear friend. “I’ll have Spectre Williams forward copies of her latest reports to you. Take the time to read them, get up to speed on everything that is happening.” A small smile finally came to her lips as she said, “You trained her well, Captain. Ashley is quite capable and has the collection effort well in hand; you need not rush in to save the day. Not this time.”

“We’ll do that, Councilor.” Liara stepped up to Shepard’s side. “Assuming, of course, Ashley actually sends them to us and doesn’t withhold on principle, in an attempt to save us from ourselves. We can read the reports wherever we are… we need not be sitting on Thessia or the CGC to do so; in that, you are most definitely correct.”

“And,” Shepard added with a grin, “this place is most definitely beautiful. We’ve been having a grand time, that’s for certain. Even so, please get in touch with Ashley as soon as you can. It’s the not knowing what’s going on that’s the hardest for us to stand. Once we get caught up, we’ll let you know what we decide regarding our return date.”

“Fine.” Sighing in resignation, Tevos continued, “I suppose that is the most favorable response I can expect from you two. I certainly cannot fault you, as it is that very same determination and commitment that won the war… for all of us. We will talk again soon, I am sure.”

“Probably sooner than you would wish, Councilor.” Shepard offered up a quick wave before reaching forward and terminating the connection.

Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large – 26 Aug 2188

Petty Officer First Class Sheldon Dubow was standing alongside the combat status display in the Normandy’s war room, monitoring routine comms traffic between the Neema and the Moreh, while attempting to intercept any messages being sent to or from the Nalotir; the light frigate, being used by the Quarians to raid shipments of dextro food supplies bound for Turian colonies, had flown straight to the orbit of Trigestis after entering the Chomos System.

Even though he was recording everything for further analysis later, he was concentrating intently on the messages, so was more than a bit surprised when the QEC in the adjacent compartment trilled to indicate a priority message. With only a couple of steps, Dubow took a quick look at the sender’s ident code, immediately identifying the unexpected caller as someone from the Council. Quickly palming the virtual ACCEPT control on the haptic interface attached to the rail outside the projection platform, he answered the call: “Spectre vessel Normandy SR2.”

“Councilor Raesia Tevos, calling for Spectre Ashley Williams.” The surprise in Dubow’s expression must have been apparent to Dalis Shegos, the councilor’s aide. “I apologize for having to
Sheldon’s eyes widened ever so slightly before he schooled his expression and replied, “Dubow… Petty Officer First Class Sheldon Dubow… and no apology needed… or expected. It’s just… with us running silent, we didn’t anticipate…” He paused, purposely placing four fingers against his lips to stop himself from rambling. “I will find Spectre Williams for you immediately, Ms Shegos. Please stand by…” Dubow muted the mic and stepped away from the video pickup before touching the comm link in his ear and saying, “Spectre Williams… You have a priority call in the QEC, Ma’am.”

Ashley must have been close, as she appeared in the war room within seconds of Dubow’s page. All business, Ashley crisply asked, “What have you got, Mr Dubow?”

Sheldon motioned towards the QEC chamber as he said, “Councilor Tevos needs to speak with you, Ma’am.”

The raven-haired Spectre nodded as she moved to stand in front of the device; leaning on the safety rail, she unmuted the mic and waited for a moment. The projection pad was empty of a caller for only a few seconds before an elegantly attired Councilor Tevos stepped into view. Ashley smiled as she asked, “Councilor? What may I do for you, Ma’am?”

The councilor returned the smile as she responded, “We never have the luxury of just calling one another to say hello, or inquire about each other’s health or about what has been going on in our lives, do we Spectre Williams?” Tevos shook her head slightly before continuing. “As you probably have your hands full monitoring the situation with the dissident Quarians, I would not expect you to also be monitoring the latest news concerning Thessia… specifically the violent reaction of the Serrice Guard to a peaceful protest in that city.”

Ashley was instantly in full-soldier mode as she lowered her brows and replied with an edge to her voice, “My God, Councilor… what has happened?”

Tevos’ smile dimmed slightly as she answered, “The short story? Matriarch Galalina Niaso, the newly appointed Minister of Justice in Serrice, apparently ordered the Serrice Guard to end a demonstration… by whatever means deemed necessary. Unfortunately, their actions resulted in fifteen injured civilians – some seriously so – and three deaths. Of the Serrice Guard, three of their number were also hospitalized.”

Ashley’s expression was somber, as was her tone. “I am so very sorry, Councilor. In all my dealings with the galaxies other races, I always believed the Asari to be the most non-violent of them all… at least among themselves. To have a peaceful demonstration, no matter the subject matter, be violently broken up this way makes me think of Human history from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.”

Tevos looked down for several moments before raising sad eyes back to Ashley’s image. “Unfortunately, the Asari can be every bit as violent as the Turians…” she paused, allowing herself a small, self-deprecating chuckle as she finished with, “… or even the Krogan. Simply look to the criminal elements of the Eclipse and Jona Sederis if you doubt my words.” Before Ashley could reply, the councilor hurriedly continued. “The Justicars are investigating this incident and will be looking into other things concerning the defense ministers… every one of them. I will send all the information to which I am privy to your ship, Spectre, addressed to you and Spectre Shepard… but I did not contact you just to tell you that.”

“Shepard?” Williams’ look of astonishment was quickly replaced with one of curiosity… particularly when she noted that Tevos was beginning to grin. “If you’re contacting her on their
honeymoon, then I can’t wait to hear the real reason you’re speaking with me, Councilor. As you said, you never call to simply inquire about my health.”

After a brief pause to carefully choose her words, she said, “Ashley… Unfortunately, Spectre Shepard and Lady T’Soni are the ones who called me regarding the incident in Serrice. I did not contact them to pass on the information; they heard it from the matriarch who owns and operates the resort…, including the fact that the Justicars are investigating. When they called, they also expressed an increasing frustration about not knowing what was going on regarding the Quarians.”

The councilor’s grin began to return; she honestly enjoyed speaking with all the Humans associated with Shepard, particularly this one. “They are contemplating ending their vacation… their honeymoon… early, in order to return to work, which is something I am very much against them doing. I promptly informed Shepard she had trained you well, so there was no need for her to rush back to work, and it was only grudgingly that Liara agreed to remain on Sanves while they reviewed the available mission data and she performed her own analysis… But, she also suspects you might withhold those reports just to keep them from reentering the fray early.”

Tevos’ grin threatened to swallow her entire face as she finished, “As such, I need you to do me a huge personal favor, Ashley. I am… directing you… to forward a copy of all the information you’ve been able to gather on our Quarian friends to Shepard and Lady T’Soni aboard the Aletheia, which I hope remains docked at the Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort for the remainder of the month. Please, do not disappoint me, Spectre. You need to follow through and actually send them everything… and I do mean everything. You must promise me that you will not disappoint Doctor T’Soni by withholding even a single report. You must be thorough… exceedingly… thorough.”

Ashley grinned and tilted her head slightly. “Councilor, you actually hope I’ll overwhelm them with reports on everything they’ve missed in the past ten days! They’ll have to take their time getting up to speed before they can jump back in… and I am pretty confident that would take much longer than the four days they have remaining.”

Tevos smiled in return. “I can see you understand me completely, Spectre Williams, but don’t be so certain you… or I… can slow that pair down, even if it is for their own good.”

Williams chuckled as she replied, “Oh, I’m sure neither of them can be slowed down, Councilor. Won’t keep me from trying, though. If nothing else, I should be able to convince them there’s nothing to do… at least not at the moment. If there’s nothing further?”

Tevos continued to smile as she said, “I believe we have covered everything, Ms Williams. It has been a pleasure to speak with you.”

Ashley grinned as she answered, “In that case, I’ll talk to you again, soon.” With that, she terminated the connection, then looked around at Sheldon Dubow.

“You heard everything we discussed, Petty Officer. Compile all the data we’ve collected about our friends out there, along with what we have concerning the Nalotir and get it sent to the Aletheia. Also, as soon as the data-packet from Tevos arrives, take a quick look through the info and get me a summary of what the Hell happened in Serrice.” The Commander nodded at Dubow as she added, “You’ve been doing this sort of thing long enough to know the differences between what’s important and what’s trivial, Mr Dubow. Should be a piece of cake.”

Dubow nodded as he replied, “Not to be second-guessing you Ma’am, or the councilor, but do you think sending them all this info will keep them out of play for long? I mean, honestly? You know how they are, better than most.” The man shook his head as he concluded, “I’d almost bet they’re back at the estate and on board the Knight Shade in less than three days.”
Ashley’s mouth dropped for a moment; gathering her wits, she declared, “I’ll take that bet, Petty Officer! Twenty creds says they stay at the resort for the entire time.”

To his credit, Dubow didn’t hesitate as he grinned in reply. “Done!”

Chapter End Notes

A BIG thank you out to Old Gamer, who made this chapter happen this week. No way I would have had it ready to publish without a huge 11th hour assist!
After the Brokerage full-analysis suite had been relocated from the Aletheia to the Night Shadow, Liara had been thrilled when Miranda, Judea and Samantha Traynor had also managed to assemble, install and configure two complete, standalone comm units – with all the necessary special coding and encryption equipment – for both the Knight Shade and the Aletheia. It was one of those devices that now enabled the Shadow Broker to leisurely stroll to and fro while reviewing comprehensive summaries, forwarded to her by Riana as quickly as her First could create them from the full, multi-page reports. The unique encryption algorithm devised by the tech-trio made it possible for Riana to send the information directly from the comm suite to Liara’s omnitool, without the delay that would have otherwise been caused by having to remove any and all of the sensitive ‘limited distribution’ information contained within the reports.

Liara paused in her reading and smiled softly as she glanced over at her Siame, who was standing at the weapons bench cleaning her shotgun. They had come a long way in the past few years and Liara was occasionally still dumbfounded by the knowledge that she had somehow managed to fall into the position as the top information broker in the galaxy. Such thoughts still made her shake her head in disbelief.

The network had grown to three fully equipped ships – the Night Shadow, Chiroquol and Gurji’s Promise – along with a full suite at the Country Estate, as well as the comm-only suites at the townhome and aboard both the Knight Shade and the T’Soni flagship Aletheia, the last being where
Riana, Liara and Shepard were currently located. After they boarded, Riana had opened the system to see hundreds of backlogged, unread reports; browsing through the topic list, she stated, “I must admit, there is a great deal of information moving again. With the memories of the war fading into the past, energies that had previously been expended on simply surviving to see another day are finally shifting back to working for profit. That is a good thing.”

“Yes, it is…” Liara quickly agreed, before continuing in an icy tone, “… except when that profit is through illicit and criminal means.” The Shadow Broker paused her pacing for only a few moments as she looked to Riana. “Though, as much as I loathe the necessity of it, I suppose I cannot honestly complain; it does provide a reliable source of income to the Brokerage and steady employment for a certain Spectre I happen to be acquainted with.”

She was answered with a snort of laughter and a comment from her siame. “I believe our relationship is a Hell of a lot further along than simply being ‘acquainted’, Grá mo chrot.” Shepard, still standing at the weapons bench, had finished cleaning her shotgun and was now disassembling Liara’s heavy pistol for the same treatment. Pausing to glance at the meandering Asari, she asked in a more serious tone, “Anything interesting, Blue?”

Liara shook her head slightly as she replied, “Not really. A lot of buzz about the Serrice incident, but with the investigation barely underway, the messages are nothing but a collection of conjecture… created by people not present for the event and with absolutely no knowledge of what actually happened.” She rolled her eyes and scoffed, “I fear this is a complete waste of our time, Samantha….” Her lips twitched into a shy smile as she continued, “… and that Raesia was correct. Our time would be much better spent lounging beside the pool.”

Lopsided grin firmly in place, Shepard’s soft chuckle preceded her reply. “Maybe… But, it’s amazing to me just how much dust collects on weapons that are simply stored in a locker for over a week. If it wasn’t for the honeymoon excuse, I’d be ashamed to claim them as mine; we should give Tra’ana a shout and have them all come out here and spend a little bit of time on some routine gun maintenance… except for Liv. She should stay at the resort and spend what time she can with Zan; I’ll happily take care of her weapons for her.”

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The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 26 Aug 2188

“I am extremely pleased your sense of duty did not pull you away from me, Livos Tanni.” Her bright silver eyes flashing in the sunlight, Zan smiled sweetly as she reached over and clasped the commando captain’s hand. “With the rest of your House going to your ship, we have the entire place to ourselves… and I have no place else to be, but with you. Have anything in particular you would like to do? Someplace you would like to go?”

A long moment of silence passed as Livos watched her comrades disappear into the tunnel leading down to the maglev terminal. Zan waited patiently, understanding the conflict going on within her amantia’s mind. This is so new to her. She has never had to place anything ahead of her sense of duty… not even personal happiness. I can hardly believe her growing love for me might actually win this little battle… of course, that is truly yet to be seen. Even though she knew it was unnecessary, she squeezed the hand of the Asari at her side to gently remind the commando of her presence. It had the desired effect and Livos turned back to face the considerate guide.

“You in a hurry, Zan?” Livos smirked at her new partner as she finally turned back to focus on the matron at her side. “The way you are clinging onto my hand, it almost seems as though you are afraid I am going to bolt after them.”
Laughing nervously, Zan’s purple skin darkened slightly in embarrassment as she replied, “That is exactly what I fear, Captain. With everything you have shared, I understand how difficult this must be for you… to let a personal desire override what you feel to be a sacred obligation. You need to be with your team… maybe even want to be with them… but you have chosen me; at least for this brief moment in time, however short it may be. I hope you realize how much that means to me.”

“Surprisingly, it was not that difficult a choice, given it was practically an order from Lady Liara and Captain Shepard.” Livos chuckled softly before using her free hand to reach up and tenderly trace the lightning bolts emblazoned on Zan’s right cheek. “Perhaps now you will have time to explain to me the significance of your tattoo.”

Zan’s silver eyes shifted to a dull gray as she raised her hand to trap Livos’ against her cheek, hiding the objects of their discussion. She nervously ran the tip of her tongue over her lips before responding in a strained voice, “I must show you something, first. Will you join me in a rover and trust me to transport you to a place without first telling you where we are going?”

Peering into the gray eyes of her lover, Livos answered, “This… bothers you, Zan. Why? Did you not want these tattoos? Were they forced upon you in some manner?”

Gently pulling the warm hand down from her face, Zan forced a kind smile onto her lips, though the expression never made it to her eyes. “If you will go with me, you will know soon enough.”

“Then let us go.” Livos pulled her hand away and gestured toward the parking area. “This is obviously important to you… or, at least, significant enough that you feel compelled to share it.”

They had long since passed beyond the ‘Employees Only’ sign, and it was nearly an hour later when Zan finally brought the rover to a stop. A short walk into the bushes at the side of the path found them standing before the mouth of a cave, its entry barred and locked. Zan approached the gate and tapped a code into her omnitool, seemingly activating the power to the interface, as it began to glow. “This is my personal storage vault; everyone on the staff has one, but no one knows the location of anyone’s but their own… and if they have somehow stumbled upon someone else’s, they have no way of knowing to whom it belongs.”

Once the interface was charged to full power, Zan held her hand on the panel until the scanner completed its work, resulting in the locking bolts and latches audibly releasing, granting access to the vault. Using both hands, Zan pushed the heavy door partially open and turned to Livos. “No one has ever been here with me… not even Matriarch Marisha.”

“Our relationship is still quite fresh… and comes with no guarantees.” Livos narrowed her eyes in thought for a moment before asking, “If this is something not normally shared, are you truly prepared to do this?”

“Absolutely,” Zan answered quickly as an honest smile erupted onto the guide’s face. “There is something special about you, Liv; many things, actually, that make me trust you completely, even after such a brief period of time. I do not think I could explain it if I tried.” She resolutely pushed the gate open wider, referring to the symbolism of the action as she stated, “I want my life – all of my life – to be open to you… nothing hidden… no secrets.” She turned to the commando and grabbed both of her hands. “I am tired of hiding within myself. I have been guarding my heart for far too long… and you are the one I wish to share these things with first.”

Once they had traversed the initial fifty meters or so, motion-sensing lights winked on dimly as they walked, allowing each of them to secure the lights from their omnitools. Before long, and of great
surprise to Livos, the tunnel opened into a relatively small cavern. Within, it contained a small, bioluminescent pool off to one side, surrounded by lanterns and what appeared to be a small living area, containing all the basic necessities. “This is amazing, Zan!” Livos’ eyes were wide with wonder as she looked around. “How did you ever find this place?”

A small smile remained on Zan’s lips as she tenderly took Livos hand within her own. “When I first arrived here, Marisha gave me two months to explore; even then, she told me it would not be enough time to truly see everything this preserve had to offer. She said if I was to guide people through the resort, it was necessary for me to experience its beauty and learn its secrets for myself, for how could I truly show people something which I did not fully understand and appreciate?”

“You were out here, alone, in this vast wilderness with all its dangers, for two months?”

Zan chuckled softly, the laughter like music to Livos’ ears. “Only for ten days at a time – it was limited by the supplies I wished to carry for a single trip out and back – but it was positively magnificent, Liv… especially when I stumbled, quite by accident, upon this cavern. It is not very original, but I immediately named it Amanzi Khanyo Cavern.”

“Pure Water Cavern… from the old dialect; nicely done.” Livos waved her hand in the direction of the pool. “But I have always been told that no eezo-bioluminescent species existed outside of Thessia, so how does this even exist?”

“There are many forms of bio-luminescence, my love.” Given Livos’ interest, Zan continued to hold her hand and approached the pool. “Even Sol, with no natural eezo, has such species on the Human world of Earth. Thessia is not as special in that regard as the priestesses would like us to believe.” A smirk appeared on the guide’s face. “Apparently, I have much to teach you about the natural world, Livos Tanni.”

Livos smiled, returning her focus from the pool back to her amantia. “And, I believe, you will find me an apt student.” She leaned in and placed her lips on those of her lover.

Zan backed slowly away from the pool, bringing Livos along with her, their lips never separating until her legs hit the edge of the bed and she fell backward, pulling the commando down with her. Livos grinned and asked, “The natural world… Is this to be my first lesson?”

Laughing aloud, Zan answered, “Perhaps the second or third… depending on how you count what we have already done… but, yes, I suppose it could be considered as such!”

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Amanzi Khanyo Cavern, The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves – 27 Aug 2188

When they awoke, it was hard to determine how much time had passed, the lighting in the cave unchanging with the passing of the day into night. Livos glanced at her chrono and sat up with a start. “Goddess! It is after midnight! Lady Liara and Nara are likely worried sick!”

“Nara? That must be Shepard, yes?” Zan reached up and insistently pulled her back down by the shoulder, placing a soft kiss on Livos’ le’wĕth before responding with a slight smirk, “If they were overly concerned, one of them would have called. The cavern walls contain nothing to block communications… I am confident your omni would have awakened you.”

“Are you… Never mind, you would know… and that would have been a stupid, and possibly insulting, question.” A silly grin on her face, Livos rolled over to face her amantia, once more using her fingers to trace the tattoo on Zan’s cheek. “I hope these do not have a story behind them that is
offensive or bothersome to you.” She murmured softly as she continued, “I like them.”

“Then it is time I told you the tale.” Zan sat up and dropped her legs off the edge of the bed, to rise and pull on her clothing prior to walking toward a large cabinet. “After some Kaffe… and, I am afraid, all I have to offer are packaged rations.” She grimaced as she added, “My apologies; I should have thought to pack something for our excursion.”

“Quite alright.” Liv sat up as well and crossed her legs, stretching upward and arching her back, but not moving from the bed. “It will not be the first time I have needed to resort to rations… nor will it likely be the last. Also, I have the distinct impression the trip here was a rather impulsive offer. I do not believe you planned this out in advance.”

“That would be a correct assumption, Love.” Zan opened the cabinet, only to amaze the commando yet again. It was a compact version of a field kitchen; the ones Liv had seen before were large enough to cook for a squad, but this one was obviously designed for only one or two people.

“You are simply full of surprises! What other amenities do you have secreted away in this cave?” Liv finally climbed off the bed and began to get dressed. “Do you mind if I poke around a bit? I find this place positively fascinating!”

“I…” Zan paused and turned, meeting the commando’s gaze. After only a moment’s hesitation, she huffed and shrugged. “I did say no secrets, did I not? My hesitation is only because some of the things in here may require a bit of explanation and I would rather do that once we are no longer starving for nutrition.”

“I can see the concern in your body language, Zan.” Liv saw the reluctance in the guide’s face and immediately backed off on her request. “I can wait until you are ready to show me.”

Setting the portable Kaffe press down on the counter, Zan closed the distance between them and placed her hands on Liv’s waist just above her hipbones. “Your respect for my boundaries is noted and appreciated, Captain Tanni. As such, if you promise you will not jump to any conclusions…”

“No.” Reaching under Zan’s arms, Liv grasped her companion’s lower back as she shook her head. “I will wait for you and will take no offense over your caution. I swear it.”

“I do believe…” Zan placed a quick kiss upon her lips and continued in a slightly shy voice, “… that is one of the reasons I am coming to love you, Liv.”

Liv drew a quick breath and reflexively pulled Zan in just a bit tighter. “Love? Is it possible to honestly say that so soon?”

“Oh, I certainly believe so.” Zan’s shy smile spoke volumes about the way she felt toward the Asari in her arms. “My body lusts for yours, it is true… but my mind also relishes your wit… and my heart, your caring and honest nature. The feelings are already there, Liv. All that is required of us is to find the courage to call them by what they are.”

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The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 27 Aug 2188

Needing a break, Shepard and Liara had returned to the resort complex, planning to sit at an outdoor table in the gardens and enjoy a leisurely lunch with the commandos. They had been somewhat surprised to find only their acolyte hostess in residence, sitting by the pool when they arrived.

Smiling, Liara spoke first. “Beautiful day to be out and about, Selana.” Her eyes traveled across the lake, to see if the couple had taken a boat out. Seeing nothing, Liara continued, “Any idea where
Livos and Zan have taken off to?”

“No way to tell…” Selana grinned and chuckled before adding, “The resort is rather large and there is a rover missing. Only the Goddess knows what favorite sights Zan is showing your team captain.”

“I’m surprised Liv let Zan get her outside the confines of the complex.” Shepard’s face also held a huge grin as she thought about Liv, out and about with a lover. About Gods-be-damned time! She deserves someone special in her life. “That tells me just how much she likes this woodland guide of yours.”

“You are not the only one surprised, Spectre.” Selana’s eyes twinkled in merriment. “We have known Zan a long time and, after she told us about her mother… and what happened with Liona, we did not dare to hope she would ever be capable of opening her heart to another. As far as we are concerned, your Livos has managed a very welcome miracle.”

“And,” Liara replied, “we are going to do everything within our control to make sure they have the time to enjoy a true relationship… not one conducted via messages and vid chats.”

“Honestly?” Selana’s eyes opened a bit wider in her surprise. “You would arrange your demanding schedules around a single member of your personal guard?”

“As best as I am able to, yes.” Shepard replied without hesitation. “Captain Tanni is as dedicated as they come and, if we don’t help save her from herself, she’ll never have a personal life.” Shepard smiled sweetly and reached over to grasp Liara’s hand. “And, as far as I’m concerned, that’s the main reason we fought as hard as we did… to make sure we had the time to do just that.”

Vancouver B.C., Earth, Sol System – 27 Aug 2188

Zoë Lawrence was dreaming… about a portion of her past life… her life as Maya Brooks, working for Jack Harper, better known as the Illusive Man. She was running for her life, dodging through the claustrophobic tunnels used by the keepers, the bio-engineered, insectoid race that existed nowhere else in the galaxy except on the Citadel. She was being pursued by an indoctrinated, Reaperized Harper, intent on strapping her onto a laboratory platform in order to indoctrinate her… turn her into a Reaper-directed tool like himself.

She rounded a corner just as the tunnel finally opened up somewhat, only to run headlong into then Commander Samantha Shepard, fully armed and armored – the collision knocking the woman to the deck. To Zoë’s horror, the commander began bleeding from a terrible gash in her side. Her armor, previously shiny new, was blasted and burned away, as was portions of her under-armor mesh. Maya could see bare skin, the smooth, unmarred surfaces transforming before her eyes into horribly burned, crisp and blackened surfaces. Shepard was dying in front of her eyes!

Maya patted all her suit pockets with her hands, searching for the tubes of medigel she always took with her. Nothing. She carefully patted the visible pockets on Shepard’s uniform… those which had not already burned away. Still nothing. Shepard cried out in her agony, and Maya was completely helpless to assist her… to ease her pain. She turned away, unable to bear witnessing the commander’s suffering. When the agonized moaning abruptly stopped, Maya turned back; Shepard had succumbed to her many injuries, the pale, freckled skin on her face had inexplicably become Asari blue, her hair transformed into the sweeping tendrils of an Asari’s crest.

But it was her eyes… wide open, totally dilated… staring at her as she rose and started to flee. Though the Asari-Shepard did not move, those dark eyes followed her, accusing, judging… the dead
person continued to stare… to look straight through her… blaming Maya for her death. Maya attempted to turn and run, but the Asari-Shepard suddenly reached out, somehow grabbing at her ankles with a blue hand, tripping her. Maya felt herself being pulled back. She was sliding, faster and faster, into a…

Sitting up in her bed with a gasp, Zoë Lawrence struggled to regain control of her breathing, even as her heart pounded like a trip-hammer in her chest. Damn! Am I ever going to be free of that Asari’s accusing eyes? And Shepard… she gave me a ‘pass’ on the CGC, but did she truly forgive me?

Taking a final shuddering deep breath, she threw the covers back, swung her long legs around and got to her feet. The coolness of her sleeping area made her feel as if she was freezing; examining her sleep shirt confirmed it was quite damp, enough so that it seemed to have plastered itself to her chest and back. She carefully moved through the darkened room to her bathroom, there to palm the lighting control. Bringing the lights up to a low level, she pulled the sweat-soaked garment off over her head and looked at her reflection in the mirror.

The dark eyes that stared back at her were part of a face that many might see as ‘exotic’; her skin, darker in color than most Humans, was testament in part to her African heritage, while her facial features harkened to a European background. The blending of the two had produced what she thought of as a rather plain looking face, although she had been told by many people – and many times in the past year by one man in particular – that she was breathtakingly beautiful. The ivory-color tribal design tattoo across the left side of her forehead, left temple and cheek, along with short, naturally curly black hair, marked her as different even more so than her dark brown skin.

With a heavy sigh, she turned the water on in her shower, waited a few moments for the temperature to stabilize, then positioned herself directly under the falling water, enjoying the feel of the warm liquid coursing over her skin as it washed the cold sweat from her body. Raising her arms above her head, she placed the palms of both hands against the tiles under the rainfall showerhead and closed her eyes as the water coursed through her hair, down across her tattooed face and her muscular shoulders and back. How much time has to go by before I can leave Maya Brooks completely behind me, she thought. I’ve done my best to turn my life around… to put the sins of Maya’s murderous past behind me. Hell! I even managed to convince Spectre Shepard to allow me to live. Is Jack Harper… and that Asari commando… going to always haunt my every sleeping moment?

Thinking about Shepard granting her a pass brought forth a bitter chuckle. I lost count of the number of times I kept her ass from getting shot… and she never knew… and she still doesn’t! Wish I could somehow prove it; then, just maybe, I could get her to honestly change her opinion of me.

With a heavy sigh, she turned the water off and grabbed a clean towel; after drying her torso and legs, she used one end of the towel to absorb most of the dampness in her hair by scrunching it around between her hands. Looking at herself in the mirror again, she smiled slightly at her reflection before hanging up the towel; moving back to her bedroom, she grabbed a fresh sleepshirt, pulled it on over her head, then went to her small kitchen for a snack before crawling back into bed.

The former Technology Institute on the west bank of the Frasier River had become the central headquarters of Atlas. As Zoë entered the main research floor inside the converted auditorium, Tim Stafford glanced up; with an elbow, he nudged the woman sitting next to him, then inclined his head in Zoë’s direction when Jana looked up from the data slowly scrolling by on her terminal. He whispered, “She looks a bit tired, don’t you think?”

A nearly imperceptible nod was Jana’s only acknowledgement as Zoë spotted the pair and began walking towards them; Jana stood to greet her as the Atlas leader paused beside their work stations. “Good morning, Zoë.” Guessing at the answer she’d receive, Jana asked anyway. “How did you
sleep?”

The corners of Zoë’s mouth barely ticked up in recognition as she turned to lean her butt against the edge of the counter; crossing her arms under her chest, she glanced down at Tim before turning her smoky, midnight brown eyes on Jana. “I have an itch, Jana… right in the middle of my back. It’s that creepy feeling I always experience when someone has a gun sighted in on me, only this time, it’s not really insistent… more like a general sense of, I don’t know… an incident, just waiting for an alignment of events to come to pass. Have you or Tim seen anything in the data feeds that might account for this?”

Tim shook his head as Jana echoed his motion, replying for both of them, “Nothing has leaped out at either of us… and you must know by now you would be the first one we would tell.” Jana cocked her head as she studied the woman’s eyes. “You had another bad dream, didn’t you?”

Lawrence nodded her head minutely as one corner of her mouth ticked up a tiny bit further. “Dammit, Cantrell! You never used to be so perceptive.” Uncrossing her arms, she used the palms of her hands to scrub her face for a moment before reaching up to ruffle the curly hair on top of her head with her fingers; gripping the counter edge on either side of her hips, she asked, “What gave me away?”

Jana simply grinned in response; inclining her head towards Stafford, she replied, “Tim noticed. I didn’t ask him the basis for his observation, but I immediately concurred with his assessment. What’s going on, Zoë?” Cantrell moved to stand in front of the former assassin in order to softly grip both her upper arms. Even though she felt Zoë stiffen at the touch, she didn’t let go; continuing to speak in a soothing tone, she added, “I thought your dreams of Reapers, Harper and the wartime Citadel had all faded away.”

Zoë had never cared for what she perceived as Jana’s intimate touch but had learned to tolerate it without flinching… mostly. She also knew that Cantrell was sensitive enough to feel the muscles under her hands tensing up, as if Zoë was ready to either lash out or pull away. With a grim smile, she calmly replied, “So did I, but I woke up around 0200 covered in a cold sweat, such that I had to take a shower and put on a dry sleep-shirt.”

After briefly closing her eyes, she opened them to stare into Jana’s. “It was different this time… I was being chased by an indoctrinated Harper… ran headlong into Shepard. She died from her injuries before somehow… morphing into an Asari commando.” Placing her chin on Jana’s gold-flecked brown eyes, she continued in a voice that sounded immeasurably sad. “It was that Asari, Jana… the dead commando… the one Maya stumbled over as she was leaving the temple in Serrice.”

Shaking her head slightly, she took a shuddering breath; dark eyes glistening with moisture, she added, “Only difference was, her head crests were multiple shades of dark to medium red, same as Shepard’s hair.” Zoë brought a hand up to cover her mouth; coughing into the knuckles of her fist to suppress a sob, she continued, “That dead commando is going to haunt me to the end of my days, isn’t she? She’s partially the reason for Maya’s ‘death’… after compelling her to put a bullet in Jack Harper’s head. And now, even though I’ve become a new person and helped in the reformation of Cerberus, it still feels as if it somehow isn’t enough… and I doubt it will ever be. That commando’s spirit is never going to grant me any peace, Jana.”

Cantrell studied Jack Harper’s former assassin as she stood in front of her. Swallowing the lump that had found its way into her own throat, she declared, “Zoë, you did not kill that Asari. I realize you
led the mission to retrieve the Prothean VI from Athame’s temple, but that commando was dead well before you started your run back to the A-61.” Releasing her arms to reach under them and embrace Zoë’s body, she hugged the woman tightly for a moment before taking a step back and saying, “Now, let’s start digging. There has to be something of importance… something that has the skin on your back crawling. Perhaps something with the upcoming trade agreement talks? Your hunches have never been wrong yet; we’ll look until we find it.”

Zoë’s mouth finally tipped up into a grin that didn’t quite reach her eyes. Looking first at Jana, then at Tim, she whispered, “Sounds good. Thank you.”

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Amanzi Khanyo Cavern, The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves – 27 Aug 2188

“Really?” Livos released a nervous chuckle. “If courage is all we need, then this should be easy for me… and yet it is not. I very much want it to be true, but…”

Zan pulled her right hand from Livos’ tight grasp to cup the Asari’s left cheek in a gentle caress. “But it scares you. I know… Me too. But is that not the very definition of courage? To do something anyway, even though it frightens you?

Livos closed her eyes and leaned into the affectionate touch with a soft sigh. “I suppose that is true… and I have to admit that I enjoy it… more than I fear it, that is certain, or I would not be here.”

Stepping back, Zan returned her attention to the press, eventually turning back with two cups of steaming liquid. Handing one to Livos, she commented, “Here is your Kaffe… the snacks can wait until I show you what we came out here for.” She walked slowly, Livos turning to walk at her side, toward a large armoire. Once there, she opened both doors of the upper portion and slid open a drawer contained within.

Livos gasped as she saw its contents. “Is that what I think it is? How do you even possess such a thing? They have been outlawed for centuries!”

“Yes, I know.” Zan pulled it out of the drawer and twirled the offensive object in her hands. “But those such as my mother care little for laws and bans; they do what they like.” The twirling stopped and Zan held the object up next to her cheek. “It is not what you think, Liv. My tattoo is not on my face to disguise the burns I would have… had my mother branded me as she did the slaves she sold. My tattoo is there by my choice, in spite of her.”

A confused Livos crunched up her face to express the consternation she felt. “But… why would you ink such a repulsive thing… onto your face, of all places?”

“Because I love nature… and I love the ferocity of the lightning storms that sweep across the countryside.” She almost laughed remembering the look on her mother’s face the first time she saw the tattoo. “My mother and I had a huge argument over it when I told her I liked what the bolts truly represented… nature at its height of power and glory… and that I wanted to bear a tattoo in its likeness.”

Understanding began to slowly dawn in the eyes of the commando. “She saw it as an indicator of ownership and control… over those weaker… and you told her you wanted the family slave mark on your skin?” Livos grinned and continued, “By the Goddess! The heir of a powerful crime lord was telling her she would rather live as a slave than as her daughter!”

“Yes… that is exactly how she interpreted it. But I sealed my fate by informing her that slavery, of
all the crimes the family committed, was by far the very worst. To rob and steal things was bad enough… getting people hooked on drugs were worse yet… but to deprive another sentient being of their freedom simply so some filthy-rich miscreant could be lazy or have a personal sex toy? To me, that was the most repulsive side of the so-called family business.”

Livos’ eyes flew open wide in shock. “You actually told her that? To her face?”

“Yes, I did.” A visible shiver ran down the guide’s spine before she continued, “And I have never regretted the words… even though my next conscious recollection was over a week later when I woke in a hospital being told I had been in a very bad airca crash.”

“Your own mother had you beaten, almost to death, and blamed it on a crash?” Spitting the words out in a rage, Livos’ body was physically shaking over what Zan had just told her.

“Oh, nothing so banal, Liv.” Zan reached out and grabbed the commando’s upper arms, stilling the irate captain with her soothing touch. “She knocked me out with that damned branding iron and then placed me in one of our racers – shortly before piloting it remotely into the side of a mountain … I am guessing at full race velocity, from the remains of the car.” Zan shook her head in bewilderment. “I never should have survived that crash, but I did. Once I recovered, I went to University and got this tattoo, after which I never went home again… at least not until Leona’s kidnapping.” Her silver eyes took on the glint of a sharpened blade ready to find its target as she continued, “The look on the matriarch’s face when I stormed in the front door was worth every ounce of pain she ever inflicted upon me. She hid it quickly enough… but it was much too late; I had seen the surprise… and the flash of fear at what she had created.”

After a deep, calming breath, Zan had managed to finish the story of the week-long argument with her family, her stubborn refusal to return to them as the heir to the empire, and their eventual, however reluctant, release of Leona… and the unavoidable end to their relationship that followed promptly after the event. “To this day, I mourn the dreadful shattering of my heart caused by Leona’s abrupt departure… particularly after all I risked getting her safely released. Yet, at the same time, I praise the Goddess for giving me the strength to defy that ardat who claimed she did what she did out of love.”

It was then that Livos realized tears were trickling down her own cheeks. “By the Goddess, Zan!” Her words came out in a choked whisper. “I wonder at your ability to survive such an upbringing… but cannot help but be glad that it brought you to me.”

“It is all in the past, Liv.” Seeing the reaction her words had caused, Zan approached and wrapped her arms around the commando in a comforting embrace. “Matriarch Marisha showed me that… and she gave me a second chance at life – one with you in it. I will never be able to thank her enough for that. For this.”

A few more moments passed in silence as the two simply stood in one another’s arms, enjoying the togetherness. Eventually, Livos released a contented sigh. “I suppose… now that I have the story and you have shown me your special hideaway… it is time for us to return to the world.”

A smirk on her face, Zan pushed back enough to place a tender kiss on the lips of her amantia. “It is only four in the morning, Captain. Can we take a nap and at least wait until daylight?”
Back to Business

Chapter Notes

Thanks to my co-writer, Old_Gamer, who has contributed significantly to the last few chapters… including this one. Also, wanted to ensure you all saw the ‘Character Reference’ document I posted up as an addendum to the series. Should help keep track of the multitude of OCs who seem to be showing up in my stories! Enjoy!

*Amantia* - lover (Thessian)

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

*Chandra* - insect resembling a honeybee, same name as sweetening nectar it produces (Asari)

*Kena sa'ki* - literally "the heart of evil" (Thessian); refers to Feron after his second betrayal

Maglev - Magnetic Levitation transportation

SA - Systems Alliance

*Siame* - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

*Sim’re* - “sister of my sister”, a dear friend's loved one (Thessian/Source: CDN)

QEC - Quantum Entanglement Communicator

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Vancouver B.C., Earth, Sol System – 28 Aug 2188

Leigh Maxwell – Max to his friends within the Atlas organization – did not need to use his considerable skills as a cryptanalyst for the task assigned to him. After being asked to look over a list of scheduled upcoming events, he felt he had discerned the one special occasion that would provide the greatest opportunity for an assassination attempt on one or more extremely important people. He certainly held no deluded expectations of a clean operation, knowing an assassin’s options were endless. *LEAP blew up an entire wing of a building to kill just one man... no reason to think that anyone sympathetic to that group would hesitate to do the same thing again.*

He had very easily discovered that Councilor Dominic Osoba would be joining Admiral Steven Hackett and Prime Minister Reuben Trost for a special ceremony scheduled for a month hence, on 28 September; the three of them would return to Earth for the dedication of the recently rebuilt Systems Alliance Naval Headquarters. Coincidentally, the new structure was also designed to serve as the main headquarters for the SA Defense Committee. Max took special note of the date planned for the event; it held special significance for humanity, as it would mark the two-year anniversary of the initial Reaper attack on Earth. It promised to be a solemn event, with ceremonies dedicated to the memories of the hundreds of thousands of lives obliterated worldwide in the first hours of the deliberate attacks by the merciless machine race.
Though not on the program, Max knew the explosion that had leveled the western wing of the building, violently ending the lives of nine military policemen and three prisoners – among them LEAP sympathizer Alliance Major Josiah Pickett – would not be far from anyone’s mind. Max was certain the ceremonies would go forward as planned, even if an active threat of an encore performance existed. *Gotta make sure that doesn’t happen.* It would be incumbent on Atlas to provide security assistance from the shadows as a backstop for Alliance security.

Upon studying the list of invitees, Max had not been surprised to discover any number of potential targets among the guests scheduled to attend the dedication; besides Hackett, Trost and Osoba, Spectre Samantha Shepard and Lady Liara T’Soni, while not yet confirmed, were also among those invited to the dedication, as well as any number of pro-integration civic leaders. *Security for this event is going to be a top priority… and a damned nightmare!*

Max didn’t even bother getting up from his chair, choosing instead to send what he had to the leadership – Zoë, Jana Cantrell and Tim Stafford – and return straight to work. He immediately began to hunt through older message traffic, in a comprehensive search for any indications that someone already confirmed to be in attendance on the 28th had even been hinted at as a possible target. The morning immediately following the day filled with celebration and remembrance, the three men were scheduled to depart together for Palaven to meet with the Turian Hierarchy; their purpose being to commence negotiations – in a likely successful attempt – to formalize existing trade arrangements that had been in place since the end of the war. That particular conference was one for which Max intended to do everything in his power to ensure that all three of the Alliance leaders would be able to attend.

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**Aletheia**, The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves – 29 Aug 2188

In what she was beginning to realize was an increasingly futile attempt to get caught up, Riana was still parsing the multitude of messages that had virtually choked the electronic inbox of the *Aletheia’s* comm suite when a flashing light, accompanied by a low volume, alternating high/low trill, intruded on her efforts to winnow down the massive backlog for her mistress. *Some vacation… the galaxy cannot leave my mistress or my Sim’re alone for a miserly fifteen days.*

With a heavy sigh, she moved to the small terminal and palmed the ACCEPT control on the device; she was really not surprised to see the image of Councilor Raesia Tevos appear above the console. Riana addressed the diplomat with a genuine smile, “Councilor Tevos.”

The councilor replied with a smile of her own. “Riana… I realize I am intruding yet again and apologize for needing to do so, but…” Tevos paused, glancing to the side before returning her gaze to the screen, “… is it possible for me to steal a few minutes of Lady T’Soni’s time?”

Riana had used her omnitool to send a request to Liara as Tevos was apologizing. “No apology needed, Councilor,” the commando responded smoothly. “My mistress will be here shortly.”

Liara appeared at the hatch and entered the small compartment as Riana finished speaking; with a gentle touch of her fingers on the shoulder of her First, the Shadow Broker slid into the chair as Riana rose and moved out of camera range. “Good afternoon, Councilor. What may I do for you?”

Tevos smiled. “I apologize for this second intrusion into your personal time, Liara. It seems the galaxy will simply not cease coming up with new problems to replace the old ones. I would expect you have been attempting to catch up on everything that has been happening?”

“That would be very true,” came the slightly worried response. “Our personal time became
somewhat limited the moment we heard the news from Matriarch Marisha; what happened in Serrice is almost beyond belief, Councilor. Would you think me to be incredibly naïve in believing the Defense Minister could never be so cruel… so coldly calculating… as to order the Serrice Guard commanders to use *any means necessary* to break up a peaceful demonstration?” Liara closed her eyes and shook her head slightly before returning her gaze to the counselor. “Three people… dead? Others injured so severely as to require hospitalization? What in the galaxy was she thinking? Or, was this simply a small piece of a much larger plan?” Liara rubbed a hand across her crests in irritation.

“If it was, that plan will never come to fruition now.” Tevos’ smile dimmed only slightly as she responded, “I expect the Justicars will soon get to the heart of that matter, Liara, so I am not concerned about the resolution of that issue… at least not at the present time. Unfortunately, this call is dictated by an entirely separate, though no less serious matter.” Tevos looked a bit nervous, an unusual display of emotion that indicated she was quite troubled by what she needed to say next. “Alliance Prime Minister Reuben Trost and Admiral Steven Hackett will be on Earth, in Vancouver, to participate in the dedication ceremonies for the recently rebuilt Systems Alliance Naval and Defense Committee Headquarters. Councilor Osoba, along with Earth’s Ambassador to Palaven, Arthur Hoffman, also plan to be in attendance for the ceremonies.”

Liara could see that the councilor was holding something back: Raesia obviously had something additional to discuss, no doubt related to the information concerning the building dedication. “Councilor, it is obvious to me there is more on your mind… something else regarding the ceremony must be bothering you. Please… tell me.”

Tevos sighed in resignation. “Immediately following the reception, all four of them will depart for Palaven… as the Human delegation to the first-ever, official, council-sanctioned trade conference between the two races. This is an immensely important ‘next step’ in Human involvement in Council affairs, Liara.” The councilor looked down for a moment, shaking her head in disbelief… and near despair, before returning her gaze to Liara’s image in front of her. “Unfortunately, Osoba has received a few worrisome intelligence reports. He just informed me the latest reports infer that at least one of them… if not all… may not be available to make that journey; apparently, they have been targeted for assassination for their… *alien leanings*.”

“By the Goddess, Liara exclaimed angrily. “It is barely a year since the war ended! Don’t people have enough to do… simply putting their lives back together after the Reapers? What possible reason could anyone have to wish any of those men dead? Perhaps whoever is responsible honestly only wants to disrupt the conference… dissuade the Earth representatives from attending… or even get the entire event cancelled, simply with an implied threat?”

“We have absolutely no idea.” Tevos shrugged slightly and continued, “I would love for you to discover that is the case, Liara, but it seems that no matter how great our joint successes, there are still those who mistrust anyone different from themselves… enough to the point they are willing to murder good people over it. For obvious reasons, we are currently looking at either Earth First or Terra Firma but, as of this moment, we have no details… no specifics regarding targets, plans or motive, but… it has become painfully obvious to all of us that the upcoming dedication and reception, will provide ample opportunity for such an attack.”

Liara looked down at the console for several moments before bringing her head back up. “Thank you for bringing this to our attention, Councilor. Shepard and I will certainly look into this immediately… and take whatever action is appropriate.”

“Thank you, Liara.” Mirroring Liara’s response, Tevos briefly hung her head in disappointment before looking back up and continuing, “I hope you and Shepard will have enough time to determine
the source of this threat and put an end to it. And, should it prove necessary, I am positive a bit of extra planning on our part can prevent either of these events from becoming another tragedy. All of our peoples have suffered enough misery.” Tevos cast her friend a final, grateful smile. “I truly am sorry for interrupting your honeymoon, no matter how close it is to completion. May the Goddess protect you and Shepard.”

The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves, Ialessa System – 29 Aug 2188

As soon as her conversation with Tevos ended, Liara directed Riana to change the focus of her efforts. She then terminated her own afternoon work session in order to immediately return to the resort compound and seek out her siame. Having felt the disturbance through the link, Shepard was standing at the top of the ramp as Liara walked out of the maglev vehicle. The Spectre had a scowl on her face as she asked, “Liara. What’s happened?”

“We need to pack up and prepare for an early morning departure, Samantha.” Liara looped her arm through Shepard’s, spinning her about and practically dragging her toward the house as she said, “I’ll explain as we walk.”

Once Liara relayed the information, Shepard shook her head in disbelief as she angrily exclaimed, “What the fuck? Are Humans truly that ignorant?” She looked at Liara and forced a smile as she added, “Don’t answer that question. It’s purely rhetorical… though, sometimes, I have to admit I am embarrassed by humanity’s incredible intolerance for other races.” With a snort, she turned away and spoke back over her shoulder. “Start packing, Blue, and I’ll go find Livos. I’ll have her tell everyone to say their goodbyes and prep for an early morning departure. I’ll also contact Matriarch Marisha to coordinate the timing for our exit corridor. I’m suddenly very thankful she gave us her direct contact information… I’d hate to have to try explaining this to anyone else.”

“An assassination? What in the galaxy would that gain them?” Livos stared at the bearer of the news for a moment, finding it difficult to find the right words. “Of all the ridiculous…” Her voice trailed off in surprised disbelief as the Spectre started to chuckle.

“Yeah, I know. I had the exact same reaction.” Shepard’s face held a light smile as she continued, “That’s why we get along so well, Liv. We both expect people to be reasonable, but it rarely, if ever, works out that way.” She paused and reached out to clasp the commando’s shoulder. “Please relay the news to the rest of the team and find Zan. Spend what time you have with her, even if it’s just while you pack up. Enjoy your last night as best you can… and be prepared for a very early morning departure time. I’ll message the information to everyone as soon as I receive it from Matriarch Marisha.”

“Understood, Captain.” Livos sighed softly as she shook her head in disbelief. “I’ll have Tra’ana perform a few of the pre-flight checks and inspections tonight, rather than wait until morning, just to ensure she doesn’t find something not to her liking with no time to fix it.”

“Good idea.” Shepard gave a final squeeze before dropping her hand from Livos’ shoulder. “I’m serious, Liv. Find Zan. Between this and the damned rogue Quarians, who knows when we’ll have the luxury of down time again. Could be awhile.”

As Shepard walked away, Livos opened her omnitool and typed a short note. Z – commando meeting in the common room. You should come if you can. Once she tapped the SEND command, she sent a similar bulletin – with the omission of the optional attendance note – to every commando
who had come with them, except for Riana who was obviously already aware of what was happening. As soon as everyone had arrived, Livos reiterated what Shepard had told her. “Our vacation is truly over. We’ll be home only long enough to transfer our gear to the Knight Shade and grab anything additional we might need. Then, we’ll be headed to the CGC… and likely Earth immediately following that. Any questions?” She glanced at the stoic faces before her and saw nothing but determination. “No? Then prepare for departure.”

As Livos packed her gear, Zan stood at the window, staring out into the forest surrounding the compound. “I know you are only leaving one day earlier than initially planned… yet, somehow, I feel as though we are being cheated by fate.”

“Perhaps.” Livos stopped and turned to the forest guide. “But it does not matter, because we have prepared for this and it will not change anything regarding how I feel about you, Zan.” She closed the distance and wrapped her arms around her amantia’s waist as she placed her chin on a taut shoulder. With her cheek softly touching the lightning bolt tattoos, she whispered, “Remember… we knew this would happen – the possibly long and unanticipated separations – and accepted it as part of our future lives together. It is my life as both a personal guard and a member of the Spectre crew aboard the Knight Shade. We cannot let it upset us… instead, we must cherish the time we do have together that much more.”

Relaxing into the commando’s arms, Zan quietly replied, “Of course. And I will enjoy the evening with you… but not letting it upset me is much easier said than actually done.” She turned slowly within Livos’ grip and kissed the commando passionately. After breaking away to gulp in a deep breath of air, she whispered, “And packing shouldn’t take that long. It will leave us plenty of time tonight… and it is good they do not need you to fly the ship… because that means you do not need to be fully awake for the trip.”

Before Livos could object, particularly regarding her responsibilities as the team captain, Zan used her mouth to capture Livos’ lips again, thereby silencing any words she may have wanted to say. The guide’s hands also set quickly to work, instantly and insistently driving any thoughts of protest far from the commando’s mind. The evening was yet young… there would be plenty of time for packing – later.

Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large – 29 Aug 2188

“Councilor. What can I do for you?” Spectre Williams once again found herself at the QEC with Tevos’ image floating in the air before her.

“I need to give you an update on events that are unfolding on Earth.” Ashley thought Tevos’ face looked drawn but, with the quality of the transmission, it was difficult to say.

“Earth? What in Hell has happened now?” The captain of the Normandy glanced at her communications specialist, Sheldon Dubow, who immediately nodded his head and moved to the message terminal to start the hunt.

The raven-haired Spectre’s face took on an increasing expression of disbelief as the Asari councilor explained all she knew or even guessed concerning the upcoming events on Earth; when Tevos had finished her explanation, Ashley leaned on the rail in front of her and hung her head for a moment. As thoughts of her own past briefly flashed through her mind… was I ever that damned narrow-minded when Shepard came to my aid on Eden Prime? …she raised her head to once again focus on
the image before her. “So, what does this situation mean for Shepard and the Knight Shade… will they still be available for backup if the dissident Quarians begin their attack on Rannoch?

It was Tevos’ turn to look down for a moment; the resolution wasn’t fine enough for her to really be sure, but Ashley thought Tevos’ expression conveyed a great deal of unhappiness at what she had to say next. “Don’t expect Shepard and the Knight Shade to be coming anytime soon. I’ll dispatch them your way as soon as this issue is resolved… but Ashley…” Another brief pause, then, “… this could haunt us all the way until the actual day of the dedication. I pray to the Goddess the dissidents will take no action before then. Please stay safe, Spectre Williams.”

As the councilor’s visage faded from the QEC ring, Dubow spoke quickly. “Lots of new classified traffic coming through, Ma’am. I’ll sort it out and send what you need to your omni.” He allowed a small smirk to crawl onto his face as he continued, “I guess our bet ends in a draw.”

As his captain turned to him with a puzzled expression on her face, he let out a little chuckle. “Shepard and Dr T’Soni’s honeymoon? You said they’d stay and I said they’d only last 3 days… at most. Check the calendar; they split us right down the middle. Neither one of us guessed correctly.” He continued to chuckle intermittently as he returned his attention to his message terminal.

Even with what she had just learned from Tevos, Ashley couldn’t help but smile and shake her head. “That’s what we get for trying to anticipate the actions of the Shepard-T’Soni team… it’s why they’re so hard to beat in battle… They rarely go in the exact direction expected by their opponents.”

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Aletheia, The Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort, Sanves – 29 Aug 2188

After making sure she had Lady Liara’s permission, Livos – along with the assistance of a certain nature guide – transported most of the commando gear for the entire group to the Aletheia via the maglev car… While the rest of the team would spend their last evening at the resort, Livos had opted to spend the night on board the Jorius-Class Corvette. Once they had entered the vessel, Zan whistled quietly in appreciation. “Nice ship. Of course, I would expect nothing less of House T’Soni, but… wow.”

Livos angled her head to indicate the main passage. “The forward hatch leads to the mess area and lounge, with a ladder to the lower deck for engineering and storage. Ahead of the ladder hatch is, of course, the cockpit. For now, we are headed aft toward the master suite and the two crew compartments, where we will drop the gear bags into their respective lockers; the ladder down to the weapons lockers is there as well. Once we store all the crew bags, I will give you the rest of the tour.

As they entered the second of the two crew berthing areas, Zan examined the space and exclaimed with alarm, “Just where exactly are we sleeping, Liv? I hope the master suite… because I don’t think we’ll both fit on any of the bunks I’ve seen yet!”

“Oh, no; the master suite is completely off limits,” a laughing Livos replied. “There are, however, two other compartments I failed to mention… the head – um, bathroom – and the guest suite; I will simply point the head out as we pass, on our way to the guest suite. It is a two-person compartment with a berth convertible between two singles or a double. If we take an overnight trip without any passengers, it is where Riana and I normally sleep.”

They quickly dropped off the remaining gear bags and moved down the passage. “Head is there,” Livos stated as she pointed off to the left. She opened the door on the right as she continued, “And
“this is the guest suite.” Walking in, she moved immediately to a small collapsible table between the two beds. She dropped it down and locked it into a shallow cavity in the bulkhead before returning to the door, opening a concealed panel, and tapping the enclosed haptic interface. She grinned as the bed on the right began to slide left; pointing to a small closet she said, “Sheets are in there… just make sure you grab a double set and not a single.”

As soon as the bed was made, Livos continued the tour, moving forward through the central airlock compartment and into the lounge and galley area. Zan looked around and realized the size of the space. “This has seating for over a dozen people… but only berths for ten.”

Livos’ face held a gentle smile, her dark sable eyes shining with pride and happiness at being able to show Zan this part of her life. “True, the crew is 10 persons, but we can carry a lot more if necessary. Plus, we are never all sleeping at the same time. In a working vessel such as this, private beds are something space and the mission cannot afford; it is called hot-bunking. In the commando quarters, everyone on the team carries their own bedroll and throws it down on whatever bunk is available. We normally have at least three up on watch, no matter what we are doing so, even when we have guests, there is normally at least one empty bunk, if not more.”

“Is that an invitation, Liv?” Zan smirked at the surprise that registered on the commando’s face.

“I wish! I would love it if you could travel along with us, Zan,” the captain finally replied. “But, you would be bored to death cooped up in here. Not even a potted plant for you to study.” Walking into the small kitchenette, she inquired, “This also serves as a bar… Can I get you anything?”

Zan had followed close behind and closed the gap, wrapping her arms lightly around the waist of her amantia. “All I want is you, Liv. I want no alcohol blurring my memories of tonight.”

“Sounds good to me… How about some tea?” Livos broke free of her amantia’s grasp and retrieved the necessary accoutrements for herself, including a bowl of Chandra and, then, a second cup and tea ball following an affirmative nod from Zan.

This is likely as domestic as it will ever get for us. The guide couldn’t help but smile as she watched the commando captain work in the kitchen and stated, “You know almost my entire life story, yet your past remains largely a mystery to me, Captain.” She moved to the end of the long dining table and sat in the chair closest to the kitchen, wrapping her hands around the swiftly delivered mug, its surface warming rapidly as Livos poured hot water in. “I would love if you were willing to share some of it with me now. Give me something to ponder in your absence?”

“Goddess, you are an intuitive one.” Astonished, Livos dropped abruptly into a chair beside the one occupied by Zan. “Just as you wished to tell your story to me in your private retreat, I wanted you in my environment to tell you mine. My only concern is this… How do you know you’ll still like me after I tell you who I really am? Do you truly wish to know?”

Laughing in response, Zan shook her head. “Knowing where I come from… you know I have no grounds to judge someone else for their beginnings… so tell me, please. I would love to hear your story.”

“Alright then, though I believe the end will be much more of a surprise to you than the beginning.” Livos smiled slightly as she began. “My parents worked together on the surface of Cyone, maintaining antimatter generators for the consortium of matriarchs who provided the protective fortifications surrounding the planet. Their sponsor was Matriarch Cylia T’Sasia, who also generously paid for my university specialty training… it was mostly as a bonus for the work my parents did, but also included a two-year apprenticeship on Cyone. I soon discovered I had little patience for extraction work, so shifted to a track focused on commando training. Matriarch Cylia
did not bat an eye… but instead of returning as an extraction specialist, it was assumed I would fulfill my apprenticeship contract working with the Defense Force once my training was completed.”

The smile turned into a grin as Livos continued. “My plans changed dramatically when I received an offer so generous, I could not even think of refusing. I was graduating top of my class, yet I was still surprised when House T’Soni extended a testing opportunity to me and offered to buy out my contract with Lady T’Sasia once I passed.”

“Just like that… straight out of school?” Zan’s eyes were wide with wonder.

“Yes!” Livos chuckled at the memory and continued, “I later discovered I was not the only one so blessed. Apparently, Matriarch Benezia was in the habit of searching out top talent and offering contracts other houses couldn’t even begin to match. There is a reason House T’Soni is one of the High Houses… and Lady Liara is smart enough to keep us there!”

“So, you obviously passed the test…” Zan prodded.

“Yes, I did… on my first attempt. So, I joined House T’Soni in 1790, at the age of 103.” She shrugged. “Her top commandos were also excellent biotics instructors and I soon found myself in training as a Sentinel… and on a leadership track for Captain.”

Zan swigged down the last of her tea and stood, carrying her mug to the kitchen and stacking it inside the rather large cleanser bin. “This seems disproportionate to the size of everything else… but I suppose if you are cleaning for a crew of ten, you need it.”

“Yes, and sometimes…” Livos rose from the stable and followed suit as she finished, “… it seems as though it is not large enough.” Closing the unit, she took Zan’s hand and started walking toward the forward ladder. “A few times, we have provided transport for Consort Sha’ira and her acolytes. It is amazing how many dishes they use in food preparation for the group!”

When they arrived at the top of the ladder, Livos paused and turned toward the guide, earning her full attention. “There is more below us than just the weapons lockers, Zan. I have discussed this with Lady Liara, and if you are to be a trusted member of my circle, then you need to know about it… it is very much part of what we do as a team and who I am. Are you truly committed to becoming a trusted friend of House T’Soni?”

“I… suppose I have to be, do I not?” Zan studied Livos’ face and saw… trepidation? “I do not know what you are about to show me, but I can see you are worried about my reaction. You must understand that I know about House T’Soni’s reputation for honest and straightforward dealing… and I believe I have gained a decent measure of your personality over the past two weeks, Captain. Show me what you will, and I promise to consider it fairly.”

The lower deck was much larger than Zan anticipated and she quickly realized why. “This is why the storage deck appeared small for such a vessel. I assumed it was because of all the cargo… but you have actually moved the bulkhead, to give this area more space.”

Livos said nothing, offering only a nod in confirmation as Zan continued her study of the compartment. “And that is a secondary communications suite…” She walked toward the equipment and, suddenly realizing exactly what she was looking at, spun back to Livos and exclaimed, “No, it is not! That is your primary communications system and Liara T’Soni is still an Information Broker! She did not leave that part of her life behind on Illium at all…” Zan’s mind was running at full speed as she tried to absorb everything she was seeing. “She was not the Normandy’s Executive Officer, as she is on the Knight Shade… She ran the ship’s intelligence branch and used Broker assets to do it!”
Livos was growing concerned as Zan rambled on… until her final outburst. “Goddess, Liv… That is… well… that was absolutely brilliant!”

Shocked, all Livos could utter was a single word. “What?”

“Brilliant!” Zan’s face split with a huge grin. “That was the best damned purpose the Information Broker Network could ever possibly serve! My only question would be how in the galaxy did Liara convince the Shadow Broker to help? He had to know what she was doing… and allow it. I guess when faced with the very survival of the galaxy, even the likes of the Broker would be forced to pitch in.”

Livos stood quietly, waiting for Zan to finish. Once her amantia fell silent, the captain spoke reverently of Shepard’s disappearance over Alchera, how that was the cause behind Liara joining the ranks of the information traders. “Watching over Liara those two years was exceedingly difficult… not because of what we were forced to do, but because of the well of despair that she fell into so deeply.”

Livos felt a tear run down her cheek as the horrid memories rose to the surface of her mind, but she smiled anyway as she continued, “And then, one day, Shepard showed up and literally walked back into our lives… in a forced arrangement with Cerberus, but alive and well – an answer to Liara’s prayers. My faith in the Goddess was renewed that day. I never believed it could actually be possible until the flesh and blood Spectre strode into Liara’s office.”

Zan had slid into the chair at the comm terminal in dumbfounded silence as she listened to the incredulous tale. “How in the blue blazes is that even possible?” she whispered.

“I do not know… but Shepard is walking proof that it is.” Livos smiled and shrugged. “I was forced to accept that some things simply have to be taken on faith. I could find no other explanation.”

Leaning forward intently, Zan looked her in the eye and intreated, “Please, continue.”

Livos then spoke of the hunt for Feron, how Liara had felt indebted to him, even though he had betrayed her… and how she dared to take the risk now that Shepard had rejoined her; together, they were unstoppable. “We finally learned he was being held as a prisoner on a ship in a geo-synched orbit above Hagalaz. It was the main headquarters for the Shadow Broker… and concealed within the edges of violent atmospheric storms that continuously plague the planet. Had Liara not known exactly where to look, she never would have detected the ship within all the electrical interference, even though it was monstrous in size.”

Livos practically growled the next part of the story. “Being forced to let her go with Shepard, without us as backup, was one of the most difficult orders I have ever had to follow. Knowing she was risking her life to rescue that… Kena sa’ki…” She paused and shook her head in disgust. “I suppose that is one of the reasons they did not want our help. I believe I may have killed him the instant I saw him… just as I did when he eventually betrayed her a second time… and Shepard could sense it, I know.”

Zan reached over and gripped her hand. “If he betrayed her yet again, you only did what was necessary, Liv, but… going after the Shadow Broker? Were you all crazy?” Zan laughed nervously as she released her hold on the commndo and answered her own question. “Obviously not, because you are still here… but, now, you must tell me how it all ended!”

When Livos had finally finished the tale, Zan sat in total silence, simply staring in absolute astonishment at the commando who stood before her. When she finally found her voice, she
stammered, “They killed a Yahg? And Lady Liara… is… the new Shadow Broker? By the Goddess! Such a thing is beyond even my wildest imaginings!”

“Yes, she is… and she trusts my judgment enough to allow me to give you that knowledge, so you can understand that my full mission under her employ is actually three-fold, not two.” Livos closed the gap between them and took Zan’s hands within her own. “Please tell me I have not erred with the trust I have placed in you.”

“Absolutely not, Captain. I would trust you with my life… and I want you to know you can trust me with yours… and everything that entails.” Rising to meet the commando face-to-face, Zan continued softly, “So, you are the commander of her personal guard, team leader of a Spectre ground squad, and a Shadow Broker agent. It is no wonder you have so little personal time. But, it also means our relationship is that much more important… to give you something to live for, Livos Tanni! You must be careful out there… to ensure you come home safely to me every chance you get.”

“You must be careful as well.” Livos’ voice was earnest as she spoke of the harsh realities surrounding the information she had just provided. “There are people who would gladly kill – without hesitation – for the knowledge you now possess… and I have to trust that you will never give it to anyone freely, for such an action would put us all at extreme risk.”

“Then why would you even tell me this?” Zan’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “Why would you take that risk?”

“Because I love you and we promised one another no secrets. I cannot, in good conscience, keep this from you. If Liara’s role is ever discovered, your life could be placed in mortal danger by our mere association… and you would not even know you had become a target.”

Zan paused for a thoughtful moment, finally responding, “So I am your Leona; available as a tool to be used against you should someone learn Liara’s secret.”

“I suppose that is true.” A heavy sigh escaped the commando as she nervously ran a hand across her crests. “Is that a role you are willing to play?”

“Willingly? No.” Surprisingly, Zan grinned. “But, unlike Leona, should it come to pass, I would trust you to save me… and then not hold the event against you, for I would place the blame where it belongs – on those who perpetrate the evil deed to begin with.”

“That may be easier said than done.” Livos’ forehead crinkled in consternation.

Zan grinned, reaching out to smooth the wrinkles on her lover’s brow. “Oh, I know… particularly since I lived through just such an event where my amanita failed in doing so… but have faith in me, Liv. I swear to you it will not be misplaced.”

“I do, Zan, or I would not have told you to begin with… and we would not be here now.” A smile finally returned to the commando’s face as she continued, “And… speaking of now… You have heard my story, you have seen our ship. Are you ready to go to bed?”

“After the story you just told?” Zan chuckled. “I am ready to go to the bedroom, but I feel any meaningful rest will be a long time coming. Are you prepared to entertain me in other ways, until I am ready to sleep?”

“Oh, yes,” Livos laughed in answer. “I am quite confident in my ability to find something worthwhile with which to occupy your time, Love… very confident, indeed.”
And Let the Games Begin

Chapter Notes

ASF - Armali Strike Force
CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation
LEAP - League of Earth Alliance Patriots

*Siamé* - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

XO - Executive Officer

See the end of the chapter for more notes

T'Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 30 August 2188

By the time the ramp had deployed and the hatch was opened, Liara’s father was already halfway across the parking area to meet them. Upon seeing the Asari walking quickly towards the ship, a concerned Shepard shouted out to her. “Aethyta! Everything here alright?”

She gave a quick thumbs-up but did not speak until she had approached close enough that she didn’t have to yell. “Just fine, Shepard… if the rest of the galaxy would quit being so fucking stupid… especially your damned Humans!” Shaking her head in frustration as she met Samantha at the bottom of the ramp, she continued, “I am aware Tevos already has you on duty, completely screwing up your leisurely return from vacation, but we really need to discuss a few things before you two go running off again.”

“Oh?” Shepard beckoned to Liara, who was only half-listening to the conversation through the link once she knew everything was okay, to join them. The Spectre continued speaking as the trio started their walk to the house. “So, what kinds of things are on your mind?”

“First off, Jatok has things well in order here. The *Knight Shade* has been stocked and is almost ready for departure, and I took the liberty of having Cy and her crew pack the extra weapons and gear I figured you might be needing. They are in the process of securing those weapons in the lockers aboard ship as we speak. We also loaded up a couple weeks’ worth of extra rations… just in case… and I also packed your spare armor.” Her glance shifted to Liara as she added, “…including that sexy Shadow Broker set of yours, Little Wing. You never know when you might need that.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Liara blushed slightly at the grin that appeared on Shepard’s face with the matriarch’s comment. “Though, I hope I never have cause to fully step into that particular role ever again.”

“None of this seems particularly urgent, Aethyta.” Shepard squeezed Liara’s hand in agreement regarding her dislike of Shadow Broker wet-work and continued, “So what’s really on your mind?”

“I understand the reasoning during the war, but the damned war has been done and over for fourteen months now. The shitshow currently going on is being caused by petty Human infighting, and you are pulling the Lady of House T’Soni into it with you.” Aethyta saw the ire raising in both of the
people she was speaking to, so added quickly, “Just let me finish, please, before burying me in protests… or simply burying me.” Seeing the muscles in Shepard’s jaw clench, she knew she had gained a reprieve from their counter-attack but had no idea how long it would last so got straight to the point. “We need to appoint a replacement for Molia. The lead team at the Estate is still one short since her murder and the situation is totally unacceptable.”

By this time, they had reached the house and Mozia was standing at the door to greet them. “Welcome home, both of you,” she said warmly, a gentle smile gracing her face. “I see Aethyta grew impatient and began without me. While I know she loves her commandos, there is another matter which is actually a great deal more urgent.” She gave her lover a quick, admonishing glance before continuing. “As much as it pains me to bring up such a distressing subject, it is a shortfall we have been neglecting since Benezia’s death. If Liara is going to continue accompanying you full time, then provisions need to be made now.” Her welcoming smile lessened as she turned her eyes on the young Asari. In a soft voice, she concluded, “We do not have the luxury of time to ignore the possibility of your premature demise at some unknown point in the future, Lady Liara.”

The bluntness of the statement caused Liara to gasp, while Shepard simply blinked in complete surprise, before the necessity of the act settled in and she nodded in grim understanding. Taking in the stunned acceptance on the faces of the young couple, Aethyta remorsefully explained, “I know you don’t want to even consider such a thing, which is why we put it off… at least until after the bonding… but if she continues to insist on letting you drag her into possibly deadly conflicts, the risk is very real. With no heir apparent, Liara simply must appoint a successor. If she fails to do this and dies in combat… or even as the result of an accident, House T’Soni would be forfeit; the only living person with any claim at all was Rylis Iressi, whom you should have eliminated when you had the chance. That letch would revel over Liara’s demise and, had she not resorted to criminal means, would have been able to stake her claim within seconds of receiving the news.”

Shaking off the shock of the Mozia’s brutal assessment, an appalled Liara blurted out, “Wouldn’t she attempt to do so anyway, even if I do appoint a successor?”

Mozia actually chuckled before answering, “That is one of the finer points of Asari law. She would have been able to, had she not plotted to kill you and take it illegally; that stupidity cost her what remained of her Iressi holdings and makes her completely ineligible to inherit any T’Soni family properties. The saddest part of her tale is that I know you, Liara… had she come to you as your half-sister and daughter of Benezia and asked for your assistance, I have no doubt you would have granted it and welcomed her to the family.”

Finally accepting the shocking necessity, Liara stated, “So, you need me to designate an heir.” She then turned to Shepard. “I would pick you, Siame… but if something happened, I imagine you would be at my side and there is too much risk of you sharing the same fate.”

“Besides which,” Aethyta cut in, “the heir of a great house has to be Asari, not just an Asari citizen. Shepard would not meet the inheritance criteria.”

“Then it’s you!”

Shocked, Aethyta momentarily fell silent before gathering herself and whispering, “What?”

“Then it’s you… I know beyond any doubt that you loved my mother, and you love me. You’re the only blood family I have left, Dad. Plus, you already have an established heir, another half-sister of mine whom I have yet to meet.”

As an unusually tongue-tied Aethyta fumbled for words, Mozia smiled softly and stated, “Then it is decided; Aethyta will be the designated successor… and her daughter after her, until such time as
you and Shepard produce an heir. We just so happen to have a quorum of Matriarchs sitting in your living room…” Seeing the surprise on Liara’s face, Mozia continued with a laugh, “Is this not why you hired me, dear; to take care of things in your absence. Shall we step into the other room and make your succession plan official?”

Afterward, as they sat and ate lunch, the foursome discussed the replacement for Molia Tressi. Aethyta had brought forward the two prior Armali Strike Force members who still resided with them at the T’Soni compound. “They’ve been working at various duties around the compound… performing weapons maintenance, as shuttle pilots, overseeing stores inventory… whatever needs doing. They are professionals and maintain their proficiencies without anyone having to ride them, and they practice with the commandos whenever their duties permit.”

“They seem like good folks to me. I remember them from the team when we took down Rylis. They were good at what they did back then and they survived the Reaper war with you. That says a lot all by itself.” Shepard rubbed her chin in thought before asking, “Captain T’Geya has spent the last year reforming the Armali Guard… Doesn’t she want them back?”

“Sure she does… but they were witness to the deaths of too many of their friends. They don’t want to abandon the new friendships they forged during the war… they want to stay with House T’Soni, so Ana gave them leave to do so.”

“Aa? Seems a bit informal there, Aethyta.” Shepard flashed a grin at the matriarch. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“I am quite content in my relationship with Moz, you little shit.” Aethyta smirked at the Spectre. “Do you not remember that Ana and Nayla are a thing? Have been since the joint Iressi op.”

“Oooohhh, that’s right… and Nayla saved her ass during the war. So, I guess that means she’s part of the family as well, huh?” Shepard let out a little laugh. “My bad. I completely forgot about that. So… tell me about how your prospects have been fitting in at Armali.”

Aethyta nodded sharply and explained, “Well, I have Ralis Thelvos currently serving as my Armory Master. She’s doing a damned fine job, and I’d like to keep her there if at all possible. As for Arlia Pheuss, she’s been filling in as a commando during vacations and sick time… and she fits right in. Nayla has tested them both for squad potential and they consistently rank somewhere in the middle of the pack.”

Shepard nodded in understanding. “Then I’d say go ahead and keep Thelvos in the armory if she’s a good fit there. As for who comes here… testing is one thing, but who do Nayla and Lyria recommend?”

“Honestly, I wanted to send Raeria T’Lani or Alsmeni Theya… but Nayla wouldn’t hear of it.” Aethyta grinned and continued, “She knows that I like the ASF kids and wanted to keep them close to me, but she overruled me with an argument of how it’s best to disrupt only the one team, instead of two. A big point in her favor was that on Arlia’s last go, she tested pretty damn well and both captains felt she would be a shoe-in for the Estate’s first team.”

“Since we’re headed out and you need a decision, I’ll simply trust you all to make the correct one. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen any of them work together and, seeing as the Captains did just fine before I got here, we should leave it to Nayla and Lyria to get folks moved around and settled in. I’m sure they’ll handle the transition just fine.” Shepard looked over at Liara, who was nodding in agreement. “As for the Knight Shade, I’d like to get things wrapped up here and be in the air in
Liara immediately pushed her chair back and stood, all business. “Absolutely, Spectre. I just need enough time to make a quick visit with the staff and I’ll catch up to you on the bridge.”

Center for Galactic Cooperation, Widow System, Serpent Nebula – 30 Aug 2188

Seeing the full Council of ten – eleven with the Rachni’s Asari translator – sitting around the large, semi-circular meeting table, Spectre Shepard couldn’t help but smile as she strode into the new Council meeting room. She stopped abruptly at the visiting speaker podium, popping to attention as she announced, “Councilors. Spectre Shepard reporting for duty.”

Several smiled in return, the notable exceptions being Prime Huulik and Eri’Addan vas Rannoch; the former because he was physically unable to do so; the latter, Shepard guessed at… assuming it had much to do with the pending Quarian Civil War and the attention it had drawn from various parties. It was quite likely Eri’s time with the Council had been anything but enjoyable since the discovery of the rogue Quarians’ plot. Shepard had to refrain from shaking her head in sorrow at the expression on his face. What should have been an extended celebration of the newly expanded Council following the conclusion of the Reaper War had already been turned into a forum for discussing the seemingly inevitable conflict.

“Welcome back, Spectre Shepard.” Dominic Osoba gave her an apologetic smile. “I truly am sorry for the necessity of shortening your honeymoon… even if only by a day… but I understand you have been apprised of the potential threat that has been levied against the attendees of the upcoming dedication of the new Systems Alliance Headquarters building?”

“Yes Sir, I have.” Shepard’s eyes swept the table. “That’s why I’m here. Do you have any direction for my tasking, or am I headed directly to Earth to try to ferret out the perpetrators?”

“Though I know you would much prefer to jump right into the action, Spectre…” Tevos smiled softly, “… the Alliance has that well in hand… it is their event, after all. The venue is a restricted access area and they are in the process of undertaking a full security review, while also making provisions for crowd control and weapons searches of all guests who will be entering the secure area.”

“What about operations staff? The last time we were in Vancouver, it turned out that one of our own, Major Josiah Pickett, was a LEAP sympathizer, if not a member, and likely provided them with key information to pull off the attack.” Shepard grimaced at the memory of Liara’s pale face as the Asari passed out in her arms.

“That is something you can ask them in person…” Tevos glanced at the Human councilor as she continued, “… as soon as you make the necessary personal arrangements for Councilor Osoba. He is your sole assignment for this event, Spectre; it is your duty to ensure he is available to attend the follow-on trade conference on Palaven. That conference will be the first major step toward normalizing relations between Sol and the other Council member races. Being elevated to a Council membership position during wartime did not exactly provide an opportunity to take the necessary steps.”

“Necessary steps?” Shepard looked to Councilor Osoba, who nodded in recognition.

“Yes, Shepard. As members of the Council, we have responsibilities. Mutual aid agreements have to be negotiated and endorsed by all parties, beneficial trade contracts… and a percentage of our war
assets need to be assigned to the CGC Defense Force.”


“Yes.” Osoba smiled in return and added, “Now, I don’t want to waste your precious time by making you hang around here until our Council meeting is concluded, so please head to my offices... my Aide de Camp, Staff Commander Riley Emerson, should be there waiting for you. He can get you settled in, get into the system to set up your authorizations...”

“Sir...” Shepard arched an eyebrow. “... I don’t mean to appear rude, but I am a Council Spectre; I’m can assure you, I’m already in the system... I have been for a few years now and may even have higher clearances than you.” She chuckled at his expression of embarrassed surprise. “But I’d love to meet Commander Emerson to see what he has for me and what we need to do to keep you alive for that conference on Palaven.”

“Yes, of course. Not quite sure why I didn’t consider that.” Osoba coughed and cleared his throat. “I’d appreciate any help you can give us.” His expression grew solemn as he added, “I have absolutely no intention of dying for Humanity during my tenure on the Council.”

“Good to know you already have the survivor mentality... I’ll keep that in mind and do my best, Sir.” The Spectre nodded in approval. “I, for one, was happy to hear of your selection as humanity’s representative.”

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“Staff Commander?”

Riley jumped out of his chair and spun around at the voice. “Holy shit! You’re actually here! Spectre Samantha Shepard!”

“Yup. That’s me.” Shepard drew a deep breath and walked in through the doorway. “Councilor Osoba sent me down here to get settled in, saying he’d catch up to us as soon as the session ended.”

A roll of the eyes preceded the commander’s response. “And I have absolutely no idea when that will be. The Quarian crapshoot has all their titties in a wad...” His face suddenly turned red and he glanced at the female Spectre standing before him. “Well, shit. Sorry, Ma’am. No insult or slight intended by that comment.”

Shepard simply chuckled, “Panties in a twist would have worked as well, and none taken, believe me. I would rather have that honesty than the Gods-be-damned hero worship that clings to me like Pyjak shit in the crevices on the bottom of a combat boot.”

Riley’s eyes got wide as he erupted with laughter. “I think we’re gonna get on just fine, Spectre... just fine!” He suddenly straightened up and stabbed his hand out. “Riley Emerson at your service, Ma’am!” As Shepard reached out and shook his hand, he grinned and continued, “Come on. I’ll show you your desk and the in-house, council-only message terminal. Rules are what you read here stays here unless it specifically states it’s releasable. Simple as that.”

“Were you ever in the Council offices on the Citadel?” Shepard looked around, impressed by the design and functionality of the new offices. “Because if you weren’t, you need to appreciate how much better these are. The designers did a really good job.”

“I was... but not for very long. Damned Reapers had us scrambling before I ever had a chance to get settled in. Most of my stuff hadn’t even made it out of transfer crates yet when we had to bugout.” Riley shrugged. “This is home now, for as long as the councilor needs me.”
“Speaking of which, I intend for that to be a very long time. But, for that to happen, we have to get him through this next month.”

“Roger that, Ma’am.” He pointed back at the terminal. “All the messages we have on the preparations so far are on there. What do you need other than that?”

“Access to Osoba’s protective gear. Armor, mesh…” She saw the bewildered look on the man’s face and paused. “He doesn’t have any, does he?” It was more a statement than a question.

“Not a lick. I tried to get him to order some after the Citadel attack, but he refused.”

“Well, if he wants me as his protection lead, we’re going to start by getting him the right gear for the job of keeping his ass alive, whether he wants to wear it or not.” Shepard scowled. “I’m not going to stick around for someone who’s going to ignore any advice I give them. It would be a complete waste of my time.”

She drew a deep breath and held it for a second before blowing it out slowly. “How about his suits? I need to know which he plans to wear at the dedication and at the conference… Then, I need you to put in a rush order on the exact same suits, a half-size bigger.”

“A half-size bigger?” Riley’s brow knit in confusion. “What the Hell for?”

Shepard grinned, an impish expression darting across her face. “Because the suits he owns now will be too tight over his new, light-weight, combat mesh… which I am going to requisition through the Spectre system using his current size… and which he is going to wear… every single day he’s off the CGC. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Center for Galactic Cooperation, Widow System, Serpent Nebula – 3 Sep 2188

Shepard poked her head around the corner to find Osoba sitting at his desk. “Got a minute, Sir?”

“For you, Spectre?” The man glanced up with a smile. “Absolutely. How are things going with the trip planning?”

“Riley has the trip planning part down to a science; he’s a very competent Aide de Camp, Sir. You made an excellent selection when you picked him up.” Shepard walked in and moved toward the desk as she spoke, a small bundle tucked under her arm. “It’s the keeping you alive part that I’m focusing on.”

“I suppose that’s true enough,” Osoba chuckled. “So, what can I do for you?”

“You can use your bathroom to try this on.” Shepard set the bundle on the councilor’s desk and rolled it open. The fine silvery mesh glistened under the natural full-spectrum lamps that lit the room. “I need to make sure it fits you correctly.”

“What’s this?” The councilor frowned as he looked at the garment. “I’m surprised that Riley didn’t tell you I don’t wear this stuff. It’s too damned confining.”

“He did tell me… and I told him that if I was going to be responsible for your personal safety, you needed to follow my advice… otherwise, I’ll quit wasting my time. I cannot protect someone who honestly doesn’t want my help.” Shepard crossed her arms over her chest as she tipped her head slightly to the side and shrugged her shoulders. “This is top of the line Spectre gear that I will personally vouch for, Councilor. It is extremely light in comparison to what it provides in the way of
protection and not confining in the least, assuming it’s fitted properly… like any good suit. Once you get used to it, you’ll hardly know you have it on… and it will stop any bladed weapon currently made, including monomolecular blades. Most importantly, it will thwart any initial, close-in, surprise attack and give your security team, including me, more time to react.”

“How can you personally vouch for this? It’s not like you have to wear this stuff every day…” Dominic scoffed as he continued, “You have your fully customized combat armor… with all its internal padding!”

Unfazed, Shepard reached up and casually unbuttoned the upper clasp on her high-collar Spectre jacket and then continued downward, undoing the next three clasps before folding its top open. Uncovered, the unmistakable sheen of metal shimmered in the light. “I do wear it, Sir… every single day. It has become like a second skin… so much so that I feel naked without it. This single garment has saved my life more than once, Councilor, and I’m willing to bet my life… and yours… on its utility in helping to keep you alive.”

“And I suppose I can’t rightfully accuse you of wearing it just today to make a point, can I? Your damned uniform wouldn’t fit so impeccably if that wasn’t always underneath it.” He shook his head and stood up, reluctantly scooping the undergarment off his desk before giving her a scathing look. “Goddammit, Spectre. You have any idea how many people I’ve told no?”

“No, Sir, I don’t… but even if I did, it wouldn’t matter.” Shepard couldn’t stop her lips from quirking into a smirk as she redid the clasps of her jacket. “What does matter is that I won’t accept no as an answer from you. If you’re serious about having me in charge of your personal security… if you want to survive any upcoming assassination attempts, then you need to listen to years of experience and hard-won, battle-tested knowledge.” There was no mistaking the solemn tone of her voice. “If they honestly want you dead, the dedication won’t be their only attempt.”

Osoba turned toward his private bathroom and stalked away, mesh in hand as he grumbled, “You’re just making my life more cheery by the damned minute, Shepard.”

Shepard laughed out loud and responded, “On the bright side, I’ve already had Riley pick your favorite suits and arrange for a second set of them all… a half-size bigger so they’ll fit over your new protection.”

The councilor stopped in his tracks and turned around. “You’re pretty damned sure of yourself, Spectre.”

“Yes, Sir, I am.” Shepard smiled and nodded at him as she continued, “Because the mesh really isn’t optional if you honestly want to survive your term in office with our current political climate… and I know you’re not a stupid man, which means you’ll make the correct decision, however much you may wish not to.”

Osoba stared at her for several moments. His mouth opened slightly to respond, but he chose to say nothing. Seeing nothing but harsh, honest truth in the Spectre’s emerald eyes, he huffed out a resigned sigh, turned, and stepped into the bathroom to slip into what was apparently his new, full-time undergarment.

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Alliance Naval Docks, Earth, Sol System – 4 Sep 2188

As the Knight Shade settled into its final approach for the Alliance docks, everyone from the ground teams gathered in the shuttle bay. Shepard was shaking her head as she glanced around at the entire
team and began speaking. “Thanks for your willingness to participate, but this is just our initial visit to scope out the area. Not everyone is coming with me…” Her focused shifted to certain individuals as she continued. “I'll only need Liara, Livos, and Jatok with me. Harley – I want you and the rest of Team 2 checking out the security on the docks. Determine the designated dock for the council shuttle; second team is going to be responsible for making sure that shuttle stays secure and is ready for an emergency evac if required. You know what to do… establish where you’ll want to set up your perimeter, find the defensive weak points, the works. Treat this location as hostile… I realize this is my homeworld, but we are on LEAP’s turf here, and have every reason to expect an attack… so are here to prepare accordingly.”

She heard someone clear their throat and turned. Expecting it to be Lieutenant Tra’ana Iremi quietly asking what Team 1 was going to be doing while they were on the ground, she discovered Riana standing off to one side, arms crossed in disgruntlement and impatiently tapping her foot. Letting out a quiet chuckle, Shepard amended, “Alright, Riana… You’re also with us, in your non-Spectre capacity as Liara’s First.” She then turned to Tra’ana. “Lieutenant. Since both I and Liara will be off the ship, Lusmeni has the Knight Shade… and you’re the temp XO. Please pass on to her that I want the remaining crew and first team to be running extraction and defensive drills. Just like Harley, I need you checking out the docks for penetration weak spots and potential defensible zones… evac corridors in case the dedication ceremony goes sideways… the works.”

Her eyes once again scanned across those assembled before her. “At least four lives hang in the balance of what we do here in preparation for the upcoming memorial and dedication; everyone understand their assignments?” With no objections or questions coming her way, Shepard looked to Livos. “Fire up the shuttle and ask for clearance to the headquarters. I want to be on our way as soon as the hanger bay doors open.”
thinking this whole situation is absurd? Yes, it is… It’s downright aggravating, if you ask me.” He drew a deep breath and let out a heavy sigh. “I would guess your time here is limited, so we might as well get to work.”

With Hackett leading the way, they stepped back out into the hall and moved to the Prime Minister’s office. Within, Reuben Trost was speaking with Hackett’s replacement, the new Admiral of the Fleet, Ines Lindholm. As soon as the group entered the room, the occupants turned to the new arrivals with Prime Minister Trost immediately walking toward them, a huge smile on his face. “Welcome and congratulations on your bonding! Gives us all something to celebrate amidst the turmoil.”

Lindholm also stepped up and offered Shepard her hand. “Good to see you looking so fit and rested, Captain. Last time I saw you, it looked as if you had gone a round or two with Urdnot Wrex… and lost!”

Shepard grinned and readily shook the woman’s hand. “I think we were all looking that way, Admiral. Congratulations on the promotion to Admiral of the Fleet…” After a very slight pause, she added, “I think,” with a chuckle. She then made quick work of the necessary introductions before getting back to business. “Hackett will be a tough act to follow but I know you’re up for the challenge. How’s the merger of the First and Fifth coming along?”

Following a brief two-swing shake of her head, Lindholm answered, “Not great. The merger itself was fine, but the Fleet’s rebuild is progressing at an annoyingly slow pace. Materials, manpower, facilities… all lacking, so it’s going to take a while before we’re back up to strength, especially when every other ship we build will have to be transferred to the Galactic Council Fleet until we fill their quota requirements.”

“Ahhh. Yes, I did speak briefly with Councilor Osoba about that.” Shepard cast her an understanding smile. “If it’s any consolation, every other race is in the same situation… except maybe the Rachni. I’m starting to wonder if perhaps we should contract with them to at least build the shells. We would have to repurpose the shipyards to simply do the finish work, instead of the whole damned ship, but think it could significantly speed things up.”

“I hadn’t thought of that…” Lindholm’s face lit up as she contemplated the potential of the suggestion. “That’s at least worthy of a discussion, though our recruitment rate would also need to rise significantly to meet our manning requirements if we accelerate the production schedule. Thanks, Shepard… I’ll forward the suggestion to the Defense Committee!”

“No problem, Admiral.” Shepard’s eyes darted between everyone in the room as she continued, “And, speaking of help… What the Hell is going on with Saracino and Terra Firma?”

“Your guess is as good as ours, Shepard,” Hackett scoffed. “I was actually hoping Liara could shed some light on the recent reports. We’re doing what we can in terms of general security but pinning down the actual target and type of attack sure would make the whole damned process a lot easier!”

“I promise that Liara will pass on whatever she can to you, but you must know, as a Council Spectre, I am under a direct mandate to protect the life of Councilor Osoba. I have been specifically instructed that security for anything or anyone beyond the Councilor is a Systems Alliance responsibility, not mine; I am not to be distracted from my primary mission by what they termed… secondary considerations.”

Shepard saw resigned acceptance in the faces before her as Trost responded, “We figured as much when we received the notification of your visit from Dominic. His message was… unusually terse… and rather vague. I had hoped the lack of detail was to give you a bit of latitude in what you saw as
necessary for the Councilor’s protection.”

“That would be a correct assumption, Sir.” Shepard glanced at Liara and nodded in quick recognition of her unvoiced communiqué via the link. Turning back with a smile for Trost, Shepard continued, “We are preparing to help as best we can within my authority. As such, I can relieve the Alliance of at least two of your tasks. I plan to have Livos and Spectre Team 1 provide our own security for the *Knight Shade* while Liara and the ops crew remain aboard for rapid response. Jatok and Team 2 will assist with security for the Council Shuttle while also making sure all four of the Human representatives have a safe and secured exit path to the docks following the dedication and reception… and then have enough time to get safely underway after boarding the shuttle.”

Shepard looked at Lindholm and continued, “It will then be your job to make sure that shuttle is not intercepted prior to its jump through the relay. The *Knight Shade* will be following in trail as soon as I get all the members of my team back on board.”

Liara spoke up, adding, “Should things not go according to plan, both teams will aid in the extraction of all members of the Human delegation to the Palaven trade agreement talks.” She very pointedly looked at both Trost and Hackett as she continued, “Hence why it was important for you to meet our two team leaders in person… so you would recognize them if they approach you. Should either of them do so, however unexpectedly, I would strongly advise you follow their directions without hesitation.”

“The other side of that equation,” Shepard’s commanding voice immediately drew everyone’s attention as she continued, “is for us to meet whoever has been assigned as your security so everyone knows one another… and by *your*, I mean everyone going to that conference. Prime Minister Trost, Secretary Hackett, and Ambassador Hoffman.”

“Makes sense.” Hackett nodded in agreement. “The only problem with that is the ambassador is currently on Palaven and doesn’t plan to arrive here until an hour before the dedication.”

“I had a feeling he would be doing a quick-turn, Sir.” Shepard replied with a shrug. “You’ve simply confirmed my need to visit Palaven next. But, first things first… Seeing as we’re here, have either of you been assigned a security detail yet?”

Trost looked at Hackett, who looked to Lindholm, who then turned and looked at Shepard and answered for the group. “I guess I have a few more details to work out, Spectre. I’ll be in touch in a few days, passing you details and names. I assume you plan on returning for final prep sometime before the ceremony anyway, yes?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I do.” Shepard took a quick peek at her chrono and calendar and continued, “If not before, I’ll definitely be back here the week before the event… but, like you, I’ll be in touch as things move forward.” The Spectre suddenly smiled and looked around. “Anyone for a bite of lunch before the *Knight Shade* heads back to the CGC?”

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads-up that the next chapter may be delayed... Been super busy at work and will be traveling over the next week, so I am unsure about how much time I'll have to write. Hope to see you again, sooner rather than later!
Seattle, Washington, Earth, Sol System – 7 Aug 2188 (four weeks earlier)

Douglas Walker, known to his friends… and to not a few women… as ‘The Gentleman’, had just finished listening to gadfly reporter Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani’s Westerlund News report. Standing in front of a background vid that had been recorded when the building had been partially destroyed by a LEAP saboteur and assassin, she spoke in glowing terms about the newly reconstructed Systems Alliance Defense Committee headquarters in Vancouver; further, she had placed an emphasis on the upcoming dedication ceremonies.

As al-Jilani recited a partial list of invitees for the dedication – scheduled as it was for the two-year anniversary of the Reaper invasion of Earth – Walker grew increasingly angry as she included a number of alien representatives from worlds that had initially withheld support for Earth’s struggles to survive the Reaper assault. He considered their potential presence to be an embarrassment… an insult, even… to Earth and all of humanity, and could not believe the current administration would even consider inviting such… creatures… to what should be a solemn Humans-only event.

Walker opened his omnitool and composed a terse message outlining what he felt to be simply another example of a bunch of know-nothing diplomats demeaning Humanity’s many accomplishments, with their blind acceptance of aliens influencing Earth policy, to the detriment of all of humankind. Concluding his diatribe with a suggestion that a sniper or two would be a perfect response to this surreptitious influence, he signed it, then sent it off to the one person he felt would be most likely to take some positive action… Terra Firma leader Charles Saracino.

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Vancouver B.C., Earth, Sol System – 4 Sep 2188

“I initially began my hunt a week ago. I actually had to search back through an additional three weeks of old message traffic before that in order to finally locate this.” Leigh Maxwell used his
omnitool to project his findings to the large monitors mounted on the walls at either end of the conference table; Atlas infiltrators Boris Sutton, Rich Clemons and Nina Delacroix were also attending this staff meeting with Zoë Lawrence, Jana Cantrell and Tim Stafford.

Max, even though he was quite chagrined to have taken so long to discover the information he was about to share, looked straight at Zoë as he continued, “I’m not sure how we… I missed this message from one Douglas Walker – a former mid-level operative at the Terra Firma branch in Seattle – to Charles Saracino, other than it was quite short and to the point… a private, inter-personal communiqué, not received through any of the regular Terra Firma servers. With as many filters and ongoing searches being carried out by myself, Nina, Boris and others, I can think of no other explanation for how this data was overlooked for so many days, Ma’am.”

Zoë quickly glanced at Jana and Tim before responding, “Without dredging up details of our past history, I would be remiss if I failed to point out that we have missed some serious shit at least two times in the past… with one of those two nearly costing us everything.” Placing her elbows on the table, she calmly clasped her hands together, rested her chin on her interlaced fingers and said, “It sounds as if we will be required to somehow either tap into Saracino’s personal omnitool, or hack all the servers being used by Terra Firma. Until we can accomplish that, we’ll have to place a great deal more emphasis on digging into the personal correspondence of the man. Now, please tell us what you’ve discovered, Max.”

“As you can see, this message was written and sent just over three weeks ago.” Touching several of the haptic controls on his device, he changed the background picture to one depicting an aerial, three-quarter view of the newly reconstructed main administration building. “Walker is convinced the two aliens – Turian Primarch Victus and his advisor, Garrus Vakarian – will be soiling the hallowed ground – his words – on which they will be walking when they arrive; he suggested that a fitting welcome for the four Human lackeys enabling these enemies of humanity would be a hail of bullets.”

Both Nina and Boris expressed surprise at this, while Jana simply shook her head as she scoffed in quiet disgust. Zoë’s unhappiness was also plain to see as she asked, “No reply from Saracino or his staff?”

“None so far, Ma’am, and I certainly would not expect a reply at this late date… it has been over a month since Walker sent his message.”

Jana’s tone was thoughtful as she commented, “In the many years Saracino has been touting Terra Firma as the answer to Humanity’s inferiority complex with alien races, his group has never reacted in such an extreme manner, Max. Do they even employ assassins?”

Stafford’s voice held an icy edge as he weighed in before Max could reply. “For us to believe Saracino wouldn’t have trained people capable of wet work would be a bit naïve… and more than a bit dangerous.”

Zoë agreed with Tim’s assessment. “We certainly didn’t take down every member of LEAP’s assassination squads… most were previously members of Cerberus, not unlike myself; skilled at getting in, making the hit, then getting out clean.” She shook her head as she added, almost to herself, “They don’t need distance and special rifles, people; they could kill you just as easily with a butter knife as with an assassin’s blade.” Thinking back to her own takedown of Donnel Udina while he was in custody at the Citadel prompted her to observe, “Close in, cloaked with a blade, has always been a viable course of action… it just takes a lot of careful prep to get in and a great deal more planning in order to manage a clean exit.”

Zoë briefly studied the eyes of each of the people silently looking back at her. Placing her hands flat on the surface of the polished table, she stood as she said, “For now, we continue to search. Tim,
Jana… start planning for an intervention. Max, continue to search for data relevant to this development; Delacroix, you and Sutton will assist. We don’t have a lot of time, but…” Zoë paused for effect, her mouth set in a grim, straight line. “… neither does Terra Firma. Any plans they can put together with such a narrow window of opportunity will have weaknesses… flaws, that we need to discover and exploit. Remember who we are… what we’re in business to do.”

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Turian Navy Docks, Cipritine, Palaven – 5 Sep 2188

After a short visit with the Galactic Council to brief them concerning the on-going security preparations for the dedication ceremony on Earth, Shepard and the crew of the Knight Shade made a relay jump to the Trebia system in Apien Crest. A short FTL burn later and Shepard found herself in a crushing hug from her friend, Garrus Vakarian.

“Damn good to see you, Shepard!” The big Turian released the Spectre and turned to Liara, who stepped willingly into his arms for her turn.

“Good to see you, too, Garrus. How is Desis?” Liara stepped back, a glowing smile on her face at the enthusiastic welcome.

Mandibles spread slightly at the mention of the love of his life, the big Turian’s mouth hung open for a second before he found the words. “She’s… well… yes. She is doing well, Liara… really well. She’s very passionate… and like a Varren with a bone when it concerns finding loving homes for all the orphans still out there in the wind.” The flanging in his voice nearly disappeared as he added, “And I cannot imagine my life without her as a part of it; she completes me in more ways than I can count.”

“You look happy, Garrus. She’s obviously good for you.” Shepard grinned at her comrade-in-arms before glancing at Liara. “I know how having someone like that in your life can really make a difference.” Returning her gaze to their Turian escort, she continued, “I also need to thank you, again, for your recommendations on the additions to my crew; they seem to be fitting in great. Rusim is one Hell of a pilot and, so far, Jorrill seems to be a top-notch combat officer, assuming he performs as well in the real shit as he does in the simulations.”

A shadow fell across Liara’s eyes at Shepard’s statement. {Likely sooner than later, Siame, with the Quarian situation on the edges of the Terminus.}

As the thought from Liara slid through the link, the Spectre suddenly frowned and added to her previous statement, “Though, I have to admit, I’m in no particular hurry to face a real battle test. The optimist in me hopes nothing happens, even as the realist believes it’s coming fast with this Gerrel and Xen business.”

“Agreed.” Garrus also turned more solemn with the change of topic. “I just knew those two were going to be a pain in our collective asses, but never thought they would actually break away from the Migrant Fleet and risk a damned civil war. Unbelievable!” His omnitool chimed and he glanced down before adding, “And, it seems, the Primarch is requesting that you meet with him… once you finish your meeting with Ambassador Hoffman.”

“Of course.” A light smile returned to the Spectre’s face. “We can’t depart Palaven without saying hello to Victus. I imagine he would like some information concerning our protection plans… and I expect he will be disappointed when he learns I have no say in the security plans. Ambassador Hoffman’s protection is under the purview of the Systems Alliance.”
Garrus’ mandibles flared in surprise. “What?”

“Yup. I have been informed by the Council that my sole duty as a Spectre is limited to the protection of Councilor Osoba. I am under strict orders to not allow my attention to be diverted by trying to protect Alliance personnel… on Alliance soil. Period.”

After a brief silence, Garrus nodded. “I can see the logic behind that, actually… particularly since the intelligence indicates all four are potential targets. Use an attack on one to act as a diversion; if anyone pulls off their primary to assist, they leave their own assignment unprotected.” He twitched in aggravation. “Damn! You’ve got to hate that, with Admiral Hackett in the mix.”

“A bit, yes.” Shepard shrugged and continued, “But there’s nothing I can do about it… and Hackett’s still a soldier, through and through. The very idea that he has to be assigned a security detail probably chafes him to no end.” The thought made her chuckle quietly before adding, “I suppose we’d better get to the embassy. I’m sure Ambassador Hoffman knows we’ve arrived and is wondering where in Hell we got off to.”

Systems Alliance Embassy Offices, Cipritine, Palaven – 5 Sep 2188

Once the receptionist announced Shepard and her small team consisting of Liara, Livos and Jatok, it was only moments before the ambassador’s door opened and Arthur Hoffman stepped out to greet them. “Spectre Shepard and Dr Liara T’Soni… as I live and breathe. Please, do come in! It’s my honor to meet you both!” Escorting them quickly into his office, he closed the door and led them to a small seating area… which was, in reality, a cozy private bar. Stepping behind the counter, he queried, “What can I get you?”

Surprised, Shepard eyed the shelves behind the man and grinned. “If you’re honestly offering, I’d love a Bushmills… on the rocks.”

“Ahhh… I do love an officer with discerning taste! So hard to find amongst the Turians… almost impossible. All of them are so damned uptight!” He talked as he pulled the bottle down and poured a small amount into the glass, righted the bottle, then poured a little bit more, finishing out the pour with a rather generous two-finger portion of the hard-to-come-by whiskey. He pushed the snifter toward the Spectre and turned his attention to Liara. “And you, my Lady?”

A cautious Liara eyed the many alcohols on the shelf and hesitantly asked, “In truth, I would simply like some fruit juice?”

Smiling softly, the ambassador replied, “Of course. I have cranberry, orange, or lemonade, all of which I normally use as mixers…”

“Orange juice would be lovely,” Liara answered with relief. “Thank you.”

“And you… Commando…?”

“Captain Tanni. Livos Tanni. Spectre Team 1 Lead.” Livos nodded in the direction of her compatriot as she continued, “And Commander Hailot Jatok, Team 2 Lead.” After a brief pause, she added, “I will also take an orange juice, please.”

“A fancy drinks and fruit juices. Bah!” Jatok harrumphed and growled, “You happen to have any Ryncol hiding back there?”

“Absolutely, my dear Krogan!” Hoffman laughed. “No bar would be complete without it!” A grin
spread across his face as he fetched a bottle from a special cabinet beneath the bar. “I do, however, keep it in a fireproof metal chiller, in case it decides to explode and tries to catch my office on fire.”

Once the remaining drinks were distributed, Hoffman grabbed a bottle of honey mead for himself and pulled up a stool. “So. You’re here about the upcoming trade talks, yes?”

“Actually, no.” Shepard shook her head and took a quick sip from her glass before continuing, “We’re here because of threats made against four persons, you being one of the four on that list, with indicators pointing to the upcoming Alliance Headquarters dedication.”

“While on Earth?” Hoffman looked surprised. “Why would someone want to kill me? Especially there… when the opportunities here are so much greater? Relatively speaking, Turian security is still what I would consider a shambles. I received copies of the dedication’s security plans and felt they were a bit overboard… but knowing now that there’s an active threat, they suddenly make a whole lot more sense.” The ambassador’s feeling of surprise spun toward resentment as he queried, “And, if that’s the case, why am I just now being informed of this?”

“Because we haven’t positively determined who the actors are.” Shepard sounded disgusted as well when she conceded, “We’re assuming it’s an anti-alien Earth group, like Earth First, Terra Firma, or the remains of LEAP… which is why the Earth event is the expected venue… but have been unable to confirm anything. The planners are very good at covering their tracks, whoever they may be, that’s for damned sure.” She sighed, “That, in and of itself, is a cause for great concern, because that tells me the agent is a real pro… and, if we don’t know who it is, we can’t be sure of the security of extraplanetary communications.”

“What? You mean to tell me it’s a Human group planning to kill other Humans… and it could be someone in, or aided by someone within, one of our very own organizations?” Realization dawned on Hoffman’s face. “And that’s why they had to send a damned Spectre to tell me!”

“Unfortunately, yes, Ambassador.” Shepard frowned. “And all I need to say to explain our reservations is that there is precedent… Major Josiah Pickett.”

“Fucking LEAP sympathizer!” Hoffman leaned back on his barstool and growled, “He never should have been in that jail cell to begin with; they should have launched his ass and blew him out an airlock at their earliest convenience… He was a damned fucking traitor of the first order!”

“Agreed… except we had hoped to get the names of his accomplices… which we never did.” Shepard pursed her lips and waited for a response.

She didn’t have to wait long as Hoffman sat forward and took another swig of his mead before commenting, “Which means it’s very likely there could still be some hiding in the ranks. Son of a bitch.” He looked at his guests and shook his head in disgust. “So, what? You want me to stay here? Not go to the ceremony?”

“That’s one of your choices,” Jatok rumbled. “But if it was me, I wouldn’t let the bastards win. ‘I’d go, armed and ready to give them an express trip to your Human Hell. Turians won’t think much of you if you don’t… They may even think you a coward,’ he added with a sneer.

“Commander!” Shepard glared at her team leader and growled, “Exercise that crusty rock in your head and remember who you’re speaking with… Think about what you’re saying and take care with your tone.”

“No, Spectre.” Hoffman shook his head. “No offense taken on my part… because Jatok’s right. Turians are too militant and proud. I back away from this and my reputation here goes right down
the toilet… and Earth would need to appoint a new ambassador to Palaven.” He looked at the big Krogan and smiled. “After playing politics for so long, I can honestly appreciate someone who speaks so bluntly. Thank you.”

Jatok glanced at the Spectre and nodded with a toothy grin on his face. “See, Shepard? Krogan tactics aren’t always bad… but you are correct. I sometimes forget how squishy Humans are… in your feelings as well as your puny little bodies… so, as a member of your Spectre team, I will try to be a bit more tactful with someone I have just met.” His reptilian eyes, not a single trace of repentance showing within, shifted to zero in on the Human male before him. “My apologies, Ambassador.”

Hoffman’s eyes had grown wide at the insult delivered so casually between the Spectre and the rather large Krogan, and then he was even more taken aback by both the insincere apology and Shepard’s laughter as she chuckled, “Damn it, Jatok. Just drink the rest of your Ryncol and shut up, would you?” Seeing the lack of understanding and surprise in the ambassador’s eyes at how she and Jatok spoke to one another, Shepard grinned. “Don’t work with Krogan much, do you?”

“No… I don’t. Never, as a matter of fact.” Hoffman looked at the Spectre in amazement. “How in Hell do you tell the difference between an insult and a compliment?”

“You generally can’t.” Shepard shrugged. “That’s kind of the point. Honestly? It comes down to tone and how you want to take it. But, if you take it as an insult, you’d better be ready to either swallow your pride or fight… because there’s rarely any middle ground with Krogan.”

“Then I’ll simply take it as advice and move on.” The man scowled with disgust. “I find it hard to believe we’re looking at our own race as the perps… Damn it all!” He once again met the Spectre’s eyes and asked, “There’s no doubt I’m attending that ceremony… So, what’s next?”

Having to repeat with Hoffman everything they had spoken about and done during their visit to Earth, it was hours later when the crew finally returned to the Knight Shade. Being on Turian soil made it impossible for Shepard to acquire the protective mesh undergarments locally for Hoffman, so she was forced to scan him for size. She then forwarded the data to the Spectre Requisitions office on the CGC and arranged for the garments to be delivered to the ambassador’s offices on Palaven. Once they had finished making what preparations they could, Shepard reminded the man, “And don’t forget to order a few new suits; you’ll need a bit of extra room to fit over the mesh… a half-size generally does the trick.”

After the ambassador had noted the advisement and promised to vet and select a bodyguard in short order, the Spectre team had bade him farewell and headed for the ship, asking their pilot. Lusmeni Thoni, to plot a course to Thessia. “The Estate?” she asked in surprise. “What about reporting in to the Council?”

“Tomorrow is Saturday and I’m taking the weekend off.” She glanced at Liara and smiled. “Monday morning is plenty soon enough to report in with our progress. If we’re lucky, we might even have an update from Earth by then and learn who has been assigned to Hackett and Trost for their personal security.”

T’Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 6 Sep 2188

Shepard woke slowly and stretched, glancing at the chrono, surprised to see the numbers 0704
glowing softly on the face. She smiled sleepily and rolled over, stretching her arm out to the other side, only to find the space both vacant and cold. [Liara?]

[Good morning, Siame. I’m in the office... Riana found something interesting.]

[Good interesting or ‘oh shit’ interesting?]

[I would have to say the latter, Love.]

[Well… crap. So much for a Saturday off, huh? Let me get some clothes on, a cup of coffee in my hands, and I’ll come join you. I’ll be there shortly.]  

Slipping quickly into a set of sweats, Shepard made her way through the estate kitchens, saying good morning to the house steward, Lyessa Raptos, as she approached the beverage center. Lyessa smiled as she extended her arm toward the captain. “One cup of Terran coffee with cream and Chandra?”

Shepard grinned and happily took the offering, sipping the steaming liquid with pleasure. “Gods, Lyessa. When did you start getting shipments of coffee from Earth?”

“Just this week, Captain,” Lyessa said with a laugh. “It seems we have a new friend… a certain Samuel Crosby? The package arrived just yesterday… we scanned it like any other shipment that arrives and found it clean.”

“Sam Crosby sent this?” Conflicting surprise and curiosity overtook Shepard’s face. “Sam is our SILC liaison in Beijing! Did he not send a note or anything with it?”

“He did, but I thought nothing of it. I don’t remember the exact wording, but something to the effect of not letting you down?”

“Please respond to him, saying the success of the SILC aid program was more than enough thanks…” Shepard paused, a smirk flickering across her face before she continued, “Never mind. I’ll send a note myself… but I do want you to check availability and add coffee to your standard procurement list, if at all reasonable.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nose, inhaling the welcome aroma floating out of the mug she cradled in her hands. “Not that I don’t like your Kaffe, but I have seriously missed this. It’s wonderful.”

She retreated from Lyessa’s promise to add coffee to their regular requests and made her way to the Shadow Broker office, secreted away in a remote, private corner of the basement behind a false wall. Riana glanced up and chuckled as Shepard entered, frowned and batted at Glyph, who was bobbing about in front of her. “Liara! Can’t you reprogram this thing to stay out of my face. If it continues, one of these days I’m going to come in here wearing my armor gauntlets and punch it across the room.”

“No need to get violent, Samantha.” Liara cast her a disapproving glance before speaking to the drone. “Glyph. Set personal space to a minimum of two meters.” Seeing an irritated scowl flare on her bondmate’s face, she amended, “Glyph… make that three meters.”

The drone immediately moved off to the side at a distance of exactly three meters and replied, “Understood, Dr T’Soni.”

Now ignoring the drone no longer blocking her path, Shepard walked up to Liara and planted a quick kiss on her cheek. “Thank you, Liara. Now… what have you found?”

Liara quickly showed Shepard the message sent to Charles Saracino by Douglas Walker, as well as the Shadow Broker file on the latter. “I think, based on this message, we will likely be seeing Mr
Walker… whether he is sponsored by Terra Firma or not.”

As Shepard’s eyes darted through the information, her frown returned. “You’re right, Li… This is not good news. According to this dossier, it appears Walker is a top assassin… an extremely capable long-range shooter. We’ll have to review all the security measures again for buildings outside the standard perimeter. Have you sent this to Hackett?”

“Yes… and Admiral Lindholm as well.” Liara sighed softly. “All I can say is that both of them accepted the information readily enough, but I got the distinct impression that I simply put a face to what they already considered an existing threat… one they have already looked into and feel they have countered.”

“Damn it. I guess that means we’ll have to look at it ourselves during our return visit.” Shepard’s frown deepened. “They have to take this into consideration. This man is far from your average shooter.” Her eyes traveled up to meet troubled blues. “You have any more bad news for me?”

“More than you care to know, Siame.” Liara opened another document on her computer and Shepard watched as a list started to scroll across the screen.

“Who are they?” Shepard’s brow pinched, seeing many of the names associated with rank… Systems Alliance military ranks.

“This is our consolidated list of Alliance personnel assigned to the Headquarters and Vancouver area who have demonstrated Cerberus or LEAP leanings in one way or another.” Liara shook her head in disgust. “Many on here have actually attended a rally or meeting at some point in the recent… and not so recent past. The highlighted names are those with verifiable multiple attendances at such.”

Shepard’s emerald eyes locked on to Liara’s blues with laser intensity. “There has to be over fifty names on that list!”

“I know,” Liara said as she nodded in abject agreement. “Now you see the problem.”

“Gods be damned.” Shepard reached up and ran her hand through her hair, looking once more at the lengthy list and wondering how these people could live with all the fear and hate within them. “How in Hell am I supposed to give this to Hackett… much less Lindholm? None of these soldiers have done anything illegal… not by simply attending a rally… but damned if I would trust them at any function for which an active threat had been verified!”

“We cross-referenced our initial list with party member lists from all the usual suspects…” Liara paused and shrugged in defeat. “But only a few names dropped off. Our biggest obstacle to taking proactive protective measures is that both Terra Firma and Earth First are legitimate coalition political parties, without any proven ties to violence or LEAP… but they still make for a rather large suspect list.”

Shepard looked again to Liara, her voice riddled with annoyance as she answered, “Or a rather large assault team… if it just happens to be a coordinated effort.”

“Goddess!” Liara’s eyes flared wide in surprise. “I hadn’t even thought of that!”

“We have just over three weeks, Liara.” Shepard glanced between her Anam Cara and Riana. “We have to vet every single one of those names and categorize them by threat level… and we need to do it fast.”

“I don’t know that it can be done, Samantha…” Liara was shaking her head, the enormity of the task before them trying to crush the air from her lungs as she continued, “It takes months to build a
“Then we have to come up with ways to counter whatever they might throw at us.” Shepard pursed her lips for a moment before adding, “And, in the meantime, we need to add people we trust to all four of the personal security teams. I’m going to give Sharon Culver a call… see who she can spare for this.”

Serrice Government Building, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 8 Sep 2188

Asari Spectre Moises T’Dura stood quietly in the corner, listening to the Grand Matriarch ramble on about the Justicars’ investigations and findings. The Justicars had gone out over the course of five days, each assigned to a different province for the investigation portion of the tasking. They then returned to the Justicar House for a Judicial Conclave, which had begun on the first of September.

Sellyna explained about how she had made a second visit to Majesa and spoken to Minister Trellani again… and then Governess Niana, exonerating both of the leading Majesan matriarchs before returning to Attena… only to find both the Minister and the Governess of the Justicars’ home province had known about the beacon for years.

Sellyna nearly spit her words. “Both Suvanni and Alana knew and purposely conspired to withhold the information which Shepard needed… the entire war effort needed… so desperately! They have been sanctioned and removed from office… and the province is in the process of preparing nominations for an emergency vote to select interim replacements for the next five months… until the normal January election results are tallied.” She calmed slightly as she added, “The same holds true for those of the Kendra Ocean; Matriarchs Cheleya and Luesia will also be replaced.”

The Justicar’s eyes shifted to the two empty seats. “This is why neither Alana nor Luesia is present today.” Sellyna went on to list those provinces which had taken the heaviest damage early on, which had denied them the ability to either receive or respond to any of the requests for information; Anerzesza, Dassus, and Ulee.

The corner of T’Dura’s mouth twitched in aggravation, her anger building at every excuse Matriarch Sellyna made for those useless old crones. Every one of those damned matriarchs should be removed from their positions! Ignorance of Shepard’s request is no defense! As leaders, it was their responsibility to know about the beacon! No matter their reasoning, they withheld that data from the galaxy and broke Council law!

Her lips curled into a sneer as she thought about what she was going to… needed… to do. She would still operate within the law, as much as that meant under a Spectre’s authority. As for those who had heard the call for help from Shepard… who had the ability to respond and did not… Removed from their positions… that’s it? That is not enough! They will pay for their crimes. As much as they may wish it to be so, the people have not forgotten about them withholding the beacon’s location, refusing to act… and getting so many Council citizens killed with their intractability.

She contemplated the names the Justicar spoke; the Justicars felt simply removing them from office was enough. Perhaps that was the case in Asari justice… but the Spectres and Council justice would be something entirely different. Those of Attena and Kendra Ocean would be brought to task, certainly, as well as the criminals in Serrice. As for Armali… T’Dura focused on what she remembered from all the news broadcasts. Matriarch Benezia had been cleared of being a traitor to the state by Spectre Shepard… Supposedly, the matriarch had been indoctrinated – something T’Dura had found hard to believe until she had personally witnessed the effects – yet had been strong enough to break free, just long enough to assist the Spectre in tracking down Saren Arterius.
and defeating Sovereign during the attack on the Citadel.

While it was confirmed Armali Defense Minister Benezia had known about the beacon, it was also obvious that neither Shepard nor Liara T’Soni had been graced with that knowledge. Besides which, the Matriarch was dead… having paid for her crimes at the hands of Shepard, herself. Armali’s Defense Forum stand-in, House T’Soni’s Matriarch Mozia, had been selected after the renowned matriarch’s death, so there was no cause to doubt her affirmation of not possessing any knowledge of the beacon, especially since her loyalties would have dictated informing Liara of its existence as soon as the call went out.

The Governess of Armali, however… Niana D’Pheya… had also known of the beacon’s existence… but, since she had not violated Asari law and didn’t know anything about Shepard’s request, the Justicars had elected to do absolutely nothing regarding her. T’Dura’s eyes narrowed, irritated by the idea that Niana would escape punishment. By withholding that information, she did violate Council law. But what will T’Soni do if I arrest the Armali Governess? Their House is not one to be taken on lightly… especially now, with Liara’s bonding with Shepard… and how they consider Niana an ally. Perhaps it is best to wait until they leave again… and speak with Matriarch Mozia about this.

T’Dura made her personal arrest list, knowing this could keep her busy for some time; a total of seven Asari citizens, spread over four provinces. And who knows what I will discover as I investigate and dig deeper into this conspiracy to hide the beacon information… Goddess! All the scientists knew; there are many conspirators yet to be revealed. It has been more than a year, yet the effects of the war continue to unveil themselves.

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Vancouver B.C., Earth, Sol System – 10 Sep 2188

In the five days since Max had presented his preliminary findings to Zoë, Jana and Tim, Atlas’ lead cryptanalyst had made significant progress in determining the direction Terra Firma planned to take concerning the upcoming building dedication and reception scheduled to take place in just under two weeks.

Max, with the assistance of Nina Delacroix, had managed to gain entry into the Terra Firma servers; Delacroix had giggled slightly at the ease with which she had managed to insert an info worming bot, until Max had reminded her the secure server she had cracked did not belong to Terra Firma, but rather to a sub-contractor that had obviously not taken seriously the security requirements of such a high-profile customer.

Nina was able to confirm that ‘The Gentleman’ – the letter writer from Seattle – was actually a former Cerberus assassin. Now a contract killer for hire, Douglas Walker made quite a tidy living for himself selling his services to a very small group of patrons. His most recent contract had involved an alien-loving traitor to humanity who had been disrupting some of the more exotic deliveries being made by the Blue Suns. The fact that prostititional slavery was still legal in a few small areas of the galaxy had not stopped this self-proclaimed crusader from publicizing when and where deliveries of captive Asari maidens were being made. The Blue Suns last request for the bleeding-heart Human to cease and desist had finally been made – quite publicly… and most permanently – with a 12.7-mm sized, aerodynamically shaped bit of shaved, soft metal alloy traveling at hypersonic speed.

Delacroix had managed to discover the file that held not only Terra Firma’s response to Walker’s rather forceful letter, but Walker’s letter as well. Their reply could only be categorized as polite, but non-committal. Tim had asked, “You didn’t expect them to simply jump up and hire him on the
spot, did you?"

Nina’s face had clouded slightly at that; she hadn’t expected to be dealing with subterfuge. “Why is it that nothing is ever simple? Seems to me they could simply contact him… or someone equally skilled, give them a target and offer them X-amount of credits for completion.”

Max replied with a scowl, “Contract killers, especially good ones like Walker, are extremely careful about the jobs they accept. Of those, the person or company letting the contract is required to follow certain protocols, not only to protect themselves, but to protect the shooter.” He entered several new parameters into his search criteria, explaining, “We just need to dig deeper, Nina. Now that we are aware of Walker’s possible involvement, it shouldn’t take long for us to discover the target, then decipher how he intends to get in, make the hit, then get clear.”

Nina expressed her doubts, arguing that the problem didn’t seem that easy. “I know you’re good, Max… we both are, but…”

“Have a little faith, Nina. We got this.”

Nina’s expression didn’t change, even after nodding in acceptance of Max’s assessment, and she mumbled, “I guess I’ll just have to take your word for it Max. I wish I had your confidence.”
After a short Monday-morning visit with the Galactic Council to brief them on the continuing security preparations for the dedication ceremony on Earth, Liara and Riana had once more secreted themselves away in the Broker office to continue their meticulous work in an attempt to build dossiers on the 57 names that remained on their suspect list after their cross-referencing had been complete. After another three days of extraordinarily long hours, they had completed only brief sketches of a dozen persons of interest when Shepard walked through the door, delivering lunch for the two Asari.

At first, Liara barely glanced up… but realization slowly dawned and she suddenly paused in her work as she looked at the Spectre in surprise. “Goddess… Is it lunch time already?”

Setting the food down on the closest workbench, Shepard answered, “Yes… past, actually. It’s almost 1400, Grá mo chroí.” Taking a few more steps to close the gap between her and the exhausted Asari, Samantha reached out and drew Liara into her arms. “I know this is important, but you need to take breaks, Blue. You and Riana are driving yourselves to exhaustion… you have to rest and eat something, or you’re going to miss something important.”

Liara’s shoulders drooped in resignation as she fell into the comfort of her Siame’s arms. “I know… but there is just so many names!” She laid her head in the crook of Shepard’s neck and closed her eyes as she continued in a whisper, “And it is not only us. Miranda and Oriana are working the list as well, but no matter what we do, it is slow going. The frustrating part is having to wait on the
queries. There is simply too much information to go through. The target organizations have been quiet the last two months – exceedingly so – yet I know their meetings must be continuing… and that really bothers me. They are obviously making a concerted effort at keeping information from slipping out, as if they actually do have something to hide.”

“Who is ‘they,’ Liara?” Feeling both the physical exhaustion and the mental anguish radiating from her Ionúin Álainn, Shepard tightened her embrace as she asked the question in a quiet voice, meant to be soothing. Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect.

Liara pushed away, shaking her head in disgust. “That’s the whole point! It seems to be all of them, so we can’t pinpoint any one organization! It would greatly decrease the number of persons we have to focus on, if I could just figure it out. My biggest fear… as you suggested… is that they truly are cooperating; a joint effort could prove extremely deadly, no matter how prepared the security teams.”

“We will figure it out, Mistress.” Riana had stepped to her side and placed a gentle hand on her upper arm, a worried frown on her face as she turned Liara toward the food awaiting them. “But Nara is correct; we must take a break and eat. The queries will continue to process while we do so… and our eyes need to rest a bit after staring at those screens for so long.” Her attention shifted to Shepard. “Thank you, Captain. I had no idea it was already midafternoon, or I would have insisted Mistress Liara take a break.”

“No harm done, Riana.” Shepard smiled and handed her one of the plates. “We’re eating now.”

As they sat down to eat, Shepard told them about her morning spent at the QEC. “I talked to Hackett again and attempted to impress upon him how seriously I felt about the threat from Douglas Walker. It took a bit of time, but he finally acquiesced… or at least pretended to. He did say he would give the exterior security details and routes another look… but, like you, Liara, I’m not sure how serious they are taking the threat that man poses. Lindholm seemed to pay a bit more attention… and promised to enhance the facial recognition screeners throughout the city. She figures the best way to counter his threat is to find and track him before the event.”

“At least you got some traction with them, which is more than I can say.” Liara glanced up from her food and managed a small smirk for her bondmate. “When the great Captain Shepard speaks, people have a tendency to pay a bit more attention than they do to her Asari lover.”

Shepard chuckled softly and smiled. “You know that’s not true. Hackett trusts you implicitly and knows how much you contributed to our winning the Reaper War.” Her smile faded as she added, “I think he’s just as tired of all this follow-on bullshit as the rest of us are.”

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Vancouver B.C., Earth, Sol System – 12 Sep 2188

Max and Nina had the undivided attention of Tim Stafford, Jana Cantrell and (most importantly) Zoë Lawrence. Using his omnitool, he placed a ‘still’ capture from a news vid concerning the upcoming building dedication. Images of the four principal guests had been superimposed over the background.

Everyone looked expectantly at the Illusive Man’s former chief assassin; she looked at each of them in turn before offering her opinion. “Based on Walker’s vitriol concerning who he called Human lackeys, I seriously doubt the Turians coming here for the dedication and reception will be targeted. My money is on Osoba, Hoffman, Trost and Hackett being the primary targets – any one of them or, God forbid, all four.” Lowering her voice to a near-deathly whisper, she continued, “What we need to determine is which of those four would be seen by Terra Firma as the most important leader for
humanity’s peaceful coexistence with all the other races in the galaxy – if we can determine the answer to that question, we’ll know who the primary target is, even if Terra Firma doesn’t actually spell it out for us.”

Nina had caught the look from her boss and quickly spoke up. “I’ll get to work confirming their arrival times and where in the complex they will be staying.” Standing, she made several entries in her omnitool.

“At this point, we can’t afford to rule anything… or anyone… out.” Zoë stood as well, looking to Nina. “So, to be safe, we’ll need to cover all our bases. I will still need you and Max to confirm the Turian guest list as soon as possible, Ms Delacroix.” Turning to her ‘second’, she said, “Jana, I would like for you to develop a plan for Atlas to provide a credible warning to the people in the Alliance who are responsible for these people’s security, from orbit to ground, their time on the ground and their return to orbit. Once the Turians leave Vancouver for their homeworld, our own diplomats will be following.” Pausing to glance around at everyone, she concluded, “The best possible outcome for this would be that all of our VIPs have a pleasant stay during the upcoming event, without anyone from Atlas having to be physically involved… but I’m not so damned naïve as to think we can avoid making a personal appearance, either. Knowledge is power, people. Let’s be powerful.”

Everyone murmured agreement with her words as they stood and left the meeting room. Zoë sighed in frustration, thinking, I don’t know how in Hell I’m going to be able to remain on the sidelines. There are too damned many unknowns in play.

With a mental shake of her head, she slowly trailed after Jana and Tim as they left for their offices. Nina and Max had already disappeared down the passageway, no doubt returning to their research stations. It looked as if it was going to be a long afternoon. Hell. It’s going to be a long couple of weeks!

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Chiroquol, Serpent Nebula, At Large – 13 Sep 2188

“Excuse me… Ms Lawson?”

The sounds coming from Barla Von’s rebreather should have given away his approach long before he spoke, but Oriana was concentrating so hard she had failed to note his arrival and almost jumped off her stool when he spoke. “Apologies. I did not intend to startle you… though I suppose this current business has us all a bit on edge.”

Taking a deep breath to calm her suddenly racing heart, Oriana turned to face the Volus as she replied, “No worries, Barla… I’m just focusing on patterns, trying to figure out what we’re missing.” She shook her head in exasperation. “There has to be something here… something we’re just not seeing.”

Surprising the Human, the rotund Volus had to suppress a chuckle before he could answer. “Oh, there most definitely is, my dear Broker. I believe there is an old Earth saying…” Oriana could hear the humor in his voice and knew he was smiling as he continued, “… something about following the money?”

She immediately gave the little financial specialist her undivided attention and her voice rose an octave in her excitement. “You found something? A pay-off? From who to whom?”

“While you have been focusing on the list, I have been working to track down another of Liara’s concerns.” Barla Von raised his arm and typed a quick command into his omnitool. “It is much too complicated to explain, so, please… check your incoming message screen.”
Oriana spun her chair around and brought up the indicated program, immediately opening the newest message in the inbox. She read through the transaction listing and frowned. “How in the galaxy…? This is an extremely… convoluted… trail. How did you ever manage to link these transactions?”

“Convoluted, indeed.” Barla Von’s voice sounded rather smug. “Terra Firma’s mistake was to not split out the sum’s final destination. Had they left them broken and sent to multiple accounts at the far end, I likely never would have managed to trace it. But, by sending a cool, even, million credits, broken into multiple quantified payments via various routes and stops… but all ending at the same account for the unchanging total? That was the mistake that led to my discovery.”

“So, who is this Damien Wintergreen?” Oriana flipped screens to the ‘persons of interest’ listing and confirmed the name was not on the list. “I have nothing on him… yet the name sounds familiar for some reason.”

“The list in front of you is only of Alliance personnel with dubious connections,” Barla Von answered quickly. “Wintergreen is one of the many aliases used by ex-Terra Firma operative Douglas Walker.”

“Oh, God, that’s right! I remember that now!” Oriana’s eyes lit with recognition. “Thank you, Barla. I need to get on the Broker net right now and get this information to the group. This is our first positive confirmation… well, as close to a confirmation as we’re likely to get, anyway… that Walker is definitely on the payroll for the upcoming event.” She frowned as she added, “The only question remaining is who his target is.”

Barla wheezed in agitation. “If only that was truly the solitary question which remained. We would be in a much better position than we are at present.”

“I stand corrected.” Oriana’s expression matched Barla Von’s tone of voice. “We still have a lot of work to do… and time continues to remain our true enemy.”

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T’Soni Country Estate, Armali Republic, Thessia – 13 Sep 2188

When the update regarding Walker came in from the Chiroquol, Riana sent a quick note to Samantha Traynor, asking her to come to the Broker office. All the regular Broker agents were already maxed out with trying to determine if any of the Alliance personnel assigned to the headquarters were a potential threat, so they needed Traynor to employ her analytical skills (along with the special access that accompanied a member of Spectre Shepard’s crew) to assist Barla Von in his search for Walker’s current location.

Answering promptly with an ‘On my way!’ text, Traynor jogged from the Knight Shade to the house, happy to have an excuse – any excuse, whatever it might entail – to see Riana. The past two weeks had been agonizing; the Asari had mostly been absent from their bed, crawling in very late and gone again the next morning before Traynor was awake. Samantha was moving fast enough she had to concentrate on where her feet were landing so as not to trip and fall, so didn’t really take the time to think about why Riana may have summoned her.

She entered the house and made her way downstairs, finally entering the passcode and staring into the retinal scanner to enter the office. The door slid to the side to reveal both Riana and Liara chattering excitedly about finally getting a break. “Sounds like good news! About damned time, if you ask me. Both of you have been working way too hard.”

Riana smiled and turned to the new arrival, placing a quick peck on her lover’s lips before saying,
“Thanks for coming so quickly, Breá.” She glanced quickly at Liara before continuing, “There is something we need you to help us with.”

“Absolutely!” Traynor paused briefly and added, “Especially if it means I get to work with you again… at least for a little while.” Her voice dropped to a near whisper as she bemoaned, “I have really missed you these past couple of weeks, Ri.”

Riana’s face immediately fell, and she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Traynor’s waist. “And I have missed you… but what we are doing is extremely important… and I am afraid we only have two terminals here, so you will need to work from the station on the Knight Shade…”

A bit angry with herself for not thinking of it sooner, Liara sighed, “I truly am sorry. With our link, Shepard and I are almost always together, sharing emotions and discoveries, quite literally as fast as thought. I completely failed to consider the impact this increased workload would have on your relationship.”

“You’re both being silly.” Traynor exclaimed as a distant memory popped unexpectedly into her head. Splitting her attention between the two Asari, she explained, “As long as we are at the Estate and within the confines of the actual Broker office, any one of us can simply shift to our omnitool.” She looked at the surprise on their faces. “Liara… You’ve worked on your omnitool in here many times… Did it never dawn on you why or how Riana could pass those summaries to you while you were working?”

Liara’s lack of understanding brought a frown to her face. “I know the unique encryption algorithm devised by you, Judea and Miranda made it possible to send data outside the net…”

“Oh, bollocks! How in the galaxy did we muck that up?” Traynor gaped at her, open-mouthed, for a moment before collecting herself enough to continue. “This whole time, you didn’t know?” She stepped over to Liara’s side. “Open your omnitool and go to your message system, please.” Once the Asari did so, Traynor pointed to a small icon in the lower right-hand corner of the screen. “If you are within the physical boundaries of this office, you can tap that little button that looks like a screen refresh icon…”

“Goddess!” Liara exclaimed, seeing her full file listing suddenly available on her omnitool. “What happens if this is open and I walk out of the office? Does that not compromise the entire network?”

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“Absolutely not. First off, the opening screen is only a generated listing of available files… an index… so, no hard data has yet been transferred.” Traynor grinned. “Select one of the files and it will download and open… into a specially designated temporary directory that is firewalled off from the routine memory of your omnitool. Any changes you make are automatically saved to a temporary version on the mainframe and once you save and close the file, it is securely wiped from your omnitool. Of course, that also means that if you forget something, you’ll have to download it all over again.” Traynor’s eyes opened wide as she continued excitedly, “The coolest thing is that once you leave this room? Everything disappears! The files, the index… the entire program. Not even the icon shows up!”

She smiled, obviously enjoying the looks of incredulity from the two Asari as she finished, “It is controlled entirely by physical location – you have to be standing within this office and you must have gained access via the standard entry protocols, or it won’t work. Once you walk in, the program contains recognition software that connects to our specially encrypted omnitools and confirms an authorized person is operating it. If both of those conditions are met, then it automatically loads the access software to your omnitool. As a security measure, it also deletes the program and wipes the entire memory segment when you leave.”
Curious, Liara opened a file and walked toward the doorway. Tapping the haptic interface, the door retracted; accompanied by Traynor, she stepped through and gasped. Her screen blanked out for only the briefest of moments, returning with her standard ‘home’ screen. “That is positively remarkable! How did we not know of this, Specialist? How could you possibly have forgotten to tell us about something so amazing?”

“I have no idea!” Traynor giggled. “It really is an exceptional program... but with everything going on... all the preparations, setting up the new ships, moving all the equipment, Shepard’s kidnapping, the bonding, the honeymoon…” She shrugged and stated, “I simply forgot!”

Liara turned back to the entryway retinal scanner and, after the system had processed her identity and opened the door, reentered the office. She reopened her messaging screen and smiled. “This is wonderful, Samantha! Thank you! I will have to be sure to pass on my gratitude to Miranda and Judea as well!”

Traynor couldn’t help but grin at the Asari; it was the first time Liara had ever used her given name... likely due to the sharing of her first name with Spectre Shepard. She shrugged off the praise as she followed Liara back into the office and replied, “Bottom line is that we can all work right here; no one needs to go out to the ship just to find an available terminal.” Traynor’s eyes traveled back and forth between the two Asari, ending with a wink for Riana. “So, with that resolved, what is it you need me to do?”

Serrice, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 14 Sep 2188

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Spectre.” Even after Captain Lydia D’Naga dropped her eyes, she still felt the accusatory stare of Asari Spectre Moises T’Dura. “I... I freely admit that I felt threatened by the Niaso family and put my own life above those I am sworn to protect... and three Asari citizens ended up dead as a result. I... I have no excuse.”

“Don’t be a fool.” T’Dura narrowed her eyes and spoke earnestly. “Such a sacrifice would have meant nothing. If you were dead and the lieutenant had been in charge, the slaughter could have been worse... much worse. It is impossible to prove either way, but perhaps your presence prevented a greater travesty.” T’Dura sneered, “Besides... if you were dead, who then would testify against the actions of Matriarch Galalina and Lieutenant Niaso?” The Spectre laughed, a grating, unpleasant sound given the circumstances. “I still find it difficult to believe you actually had the foresight to use your omnitool to record the entire conversation!”

“That was pure instinct.” Lydia scowled and explained, “I didn’t like Galalina the minute she walked into the Guard briefing room and announced her appointment. To me, she seemed... arrogant... and entitled, as if she was better than any of us, simply because she had lived longer than the rest of us in the room. Then, when she forced her child upon us – a daughter who, by the way, is too inexperienced and utterly unqualified for the job of the Serrice Guard Deputy Commander – that was when I began to suspect the matriarch was looking for a way to oust me and move her progeny into my position. It made me wonder what she was up to; why she needed me out of the way.”

“That was pure speculation, of course, and completely useless to me.” T’Dura skewered her with an icy glare. “Whether or not you value your life above that of a civilian citizen is of no matter to me... though, if you help me and I am successful in my hunt, I will put in a word for you with whoever is selected as the new Defense Minister. I can ensure you are only put on probation instead of being fired outright for gross dereliction of duty.”

D’Naga looked at her in shock. “I thought you believed I prevented a greater tragedy?”
“I said ‘perhaps’… but simply being present, breathing the same air… that does not change the fact that you failed… miserably so, at doing your Goddess-be-damned job of protecting innocent civilians. If you had resisted the illegal order, the opposite could have happened just as well. It may have brought attention to the matter and the whole disaster could have been averted. But I am no seer… and my conjecture, one way or another, makes no difference in this matter in the least.”

Snorting derisively at the captain, the Spectre snarled, “All I know for certain is that Minister of Justice Galalina issued an illegal order to prevent free assembly… which you blindly followed. Your actions from that point forward provide only for mitigation, not clemency, for your crime.”

“I did not follow that order willingly! You can ask any of the officers who questioned the order and spoke to me in private. They agreed that, given the chance, Lieutenant Niaso would likely put a bullet in my back if I did not at least pretend to follow her mother’s directive… so, I told them we had to do our best to gain control of the crowd peaceably… and then Niaso…” Tears came to the captain’s eyes as she continued, “… then Niaso fired that first shot… I think she was attempting to kill Huntress Mendaras, who was subsequently spirited to safety by some of her compatriots.”

“And the attempt on Mendaras’ life was the act that spurred the brawl… that led to your complete loss of control of the situation.” The Spectre crossed her arms and queried cynically, “So, what did you do then?”

“That was when we had our first injury; I believe… I hope… Minister Galalina is unaware I am the one who put her daughter in the hospital with a concussion… but it was too late,” D’Naga seethed. “The crowd went crazy… and the first to die was simply someone who fell and was trampled in the panic. The other two were extremely powerful biotics who appeared to be simply spoiling for a fight.” She shook her head and continued, sadness reverberating through her speech. “Those on the detail had to react, mostly to protect themselves. I didn’t want anyone hurt, so I ordered a withdrawal, after which most of the crowd dispersed on its own… all but those two troublemakers; the other two injured Guards were those who were in direct conflict with the pair of them. Most of the other injuries were collateral damage from the biotics exchanges as people tried to flee… running and falling and such, in their haste to get away.”

“So, you attempted to pull back from an out-of-control crowd instead of issuing a suppression command?” T’Dura scowled at D’Naga with disapproval. “What in Goddess name were you thinking?”

Anger started to swell in the Guard Captain and she snapped, “I saw far too many commandos under my command give their lives uselessly in the war against the Reapers.” She paused only long enough to get control of her voice again and continued resolutely, “We were on the ground during that damned occupation, playing tag with Marauders, Cannibals, Brutes… So, you have a lot of damned nerve to stand there and tell me I made the wrong choice when I decided to pull back… trying to avoid a confrontation which would have only served to make things worse and cause unknown innocent casualties! I surpassed my limit for violence and death a long time ago… and I certainly had no desire to shoot down civilians!”

T’Dura laughed, actually laughed, at the captain’s statement. “Well, you’re certainly no coward, I’ll give you that… giving sass to a Spectre like that when your future… and possibly your very life… hangs in the balance.”

D’Naga glowered and growled, “And you certainly don’t invoke any confidence in your search for justice… by first accusing me of following an illegal order, and then questioning why I chose the non-violent response when things went sideways!”

“I know it has been a few decades, but think back to your commando training, Captain.” T’Dura smirked at D’Naga’s questioning look. “It is simply an interrogation technique, that’s all. Don’t
look so offended, it’s just a way to put you off your game and get more truthful answers if you happen to be spinning me a story… or answering me with what you think I want to hear.”

“I guess it’s my fault for not realizing I was being interrogated.” Lydia’s scowl returned as she continued with a discontented growl, “You have absolutely no reason to categorize me as a hostile witness.”

“I had every reason to treat you in any manner I saw fit… until I was confident you acted in good faith, which I now believe you have.” T’Dura’s eyes narrowed in thought for a moment before she continued, “You could greatly improve your situation… and I imagine it would also please you tremendously… if you and your loyal Guard members aided in the arrest of Minister of Justice Galalina and Lieutenant Alestia Niaso… as well as Defense Minister Rahula.”

“Rahula?” The Guard Captain’s eyes widened in shocked surprise. “The rumor mill says she was cleared by the Justicars!”

“Pshhh!” T’Dura scoffed in disgust. “The Justicars have given certain members of the Asari ruling class a false sense of security! They may not have broken Asari Law, but those who knew of the Beacon and hid it from us have violated Council Laws forbidding such hording of Prothean technology. The delay in determining its location prolonged the war and nearly cost Shepard the recovery of the information she required to fire the weapon that ended the battle… Every day, Council citizens died under the Reaper onslaught, and I am prepared to hold every member of the Defense Council who knew of, and failed to report, the existence of that Beacon accountable for those deaths.”

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Systems Alliance Headquarters, Earth, Sol System – 16 Sep 2188

Boris Sutton had been a member of Atlas for less than half of the full decade he had spent in the Alliance Marines; as such, he could still fit comfortably into his SDU – which he was currently wearing in order to blend into the background of military people walking about or working near the newly rebuilt Alliance headquarters building.

Tim Stafford had tasked Sutton with clandestinely surveying the grounds and, if possible, the dedication and reception venues. He wanted to know sightlines, access points, surveillance equipment, and how difficult… or easy… it might be for somebody hell-bent on killing one or two VIPs to get in, find and eliminate their targets, and get back out unscathed.

After viewing the building from all four sides, Boris felt fairly certain the Alliance had hardened the design considerably from its original configuration. Given the ease with which one wing had been collapsed by a LEAP-affiliated assassin the previous year, it looked as if the architects had designed this replacement building to be much more resistant to an attack using planted explosives. Sutton, having had some training in earthquake-resistant building design, could detect subtle differences in the appearance of the exterior walls… doorways were smaller, their openings reinforced. Windows were fewer, and existing areas of glass were smaller overall. The overall impression was of understated strength without obvious departure from Alliance norms.

With his cloaking generator engaged, Boris made his way in the shadows beside two of the inner walls that surrounded the open-air parade grounds. The dedication of the building and the follow-on reception would take place in here, under several large, portable canopies set up to insure dry conditions for the expected 85 to 120 dignitaries and guests. The main gate – actually a 5-meter high by 4-meter wide opening in the 11-meter high wall – would serve as the only way in and out of the facility; all the other entrances and exits around the building would be sealed during the festivities.
Looking past the top of the outer wall, Boris noted there was only one building tall enough to look down into the far reaches of the parade grounds. The angle for a sniper shot would be a bit extreme, but not impossible. *I need to visit that building,* thought Boris. *Have to see how much trouble it would be to get to the top floor, find a good hiding space and set up for a shot. Then we just need to alert the authorities and let them do their damned jobs.*

Satisfied with his reconnaissance so far, Boris carefully left the same way he had entered, making sure the sharp-eyed sentries at the gate were both looking at where he was not walking. After getting well clear of the facility, he stopped in the shadow of a doorway, disengaged his cloaking generator and double-timed it to the NorthAm Bank Building, standing tall just three city blocks to the southwest.

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**Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 17 Sep 2188**

Zoë looked at Boris Sutton expectantly as she asked about his recon mission the previous day. After showing her the parade grounds and the view of the bank building to the southwest, he showed her how easy it had been for him to gain entrance to the vacant offices in the tower. “There’s a terrace – a balcony that runs around three sides of the floor. Here’s the view from the northeast corner. I scoped the distance to the portion of the parade grounds that can be seen from that vantage point, Ma’am… It’s just a whisker under 2550 meters, barely inside the effective range of an M-98 Widow anti-matériel rifle.”

“Damn! That would be quite a shot for anyone that could pull it off.” She looked at Tim as she said, “My shots into LEAP’s upper floor were only 547 meters with an M-92 Mantis. I don’t know of anyone – any human, that is – that has used an M-98 at that kind of range – if the son of a bitch isn’t locked to some sort of support, the recoil would break your damned shoulder.”

Tim glanced from Zoë to Boris. “I was with her when she took out Wendell Coffey and Lyle Bradshaw with that M-92. I expect she could have nailed them at twice that range. But 2500 meters?” Stafford shook his head in denial. “Seems like something only a synthetic – a SILC platform – would be able to pull off, and the SILC are assisting with reconstruction everywhere in the galaxy.”

Boris held up his hand briefly before saying, “Access to the terrace up there is all too easy. The building managers need to lock that upper deck down, permanently… or at least until they have trustworthy tenants in those offices.”

Jana, having remained quiet up to this point, said, “I’ll see that it’s taken care of, Boris, and there will be guards up there during the ceremonies… our people, so we can trust them.”

“If anyone not cleared for that level attempts to get in there, they need to be detained… if they resist, disable them; and make damned sure you have at least two of our people up there with active cloaking generators, Jana.” Zoë looked at everyone for a moment before adding, “If someone does manage to eliminate our visible guards, our cloaked people will have to stop that someone.”

Shifting her attention to Nina and Tim, she said in a quiet voice, “With time so short, what are we doing on the ground?”

Before either of them could answer, Boris coughed, cleared his throat, and said “I’ll be at the dedication ceremony, Ms Lawrence, and the reception afterwards. I know what to look for. We plan on placing the Québécois twins – Émiléda and Melina Cousineau – in the kitchens.” Upon seeing eye rolls from Nina and Zoë, he continued, “Yeah, yeah… I know French chefs, even if
they’re from Quebec, are a cliché straight out of a cheap spy thriller, but they have good heads on their shoulders and their close up hand-to-hand skills are rather terrifying to behold.

“Have either of the Cousineau sisters been involved in this kind of assignment, Mr Sutton?”

With a heavy sigh, he shook his head slightly. “This will be a new experience for both, Ma’am, but their trainers rate them quite highly. And Melina was on the streets in Montreal during the riots that took place after the Reapers invaded. Seems a faction of our Cerberus brethren decided that surrendering themselves to the bastards was preferable to starving or freezing to death in a destroyed city in the middle of January. Bastards were probably indoctrinated. Anyway, Melina and others disagreed with their insistence that everyone follow them. She killed six men… gutted them… and maimed another seven in order to free Émiléda from their clutches. She told me they had her sister trussed up in chains, along with a number of others.”

“I take it they joined us after we declared that Cerberus was dead?”

Boris nodded. “You’re the reason they came to us, Ma’am. Like so many others, they were tired of the xenophobia espoused by members of Cerberus, Earth First, Terra Firma and others, and they are committed to seeing Humans peacefully coexisting with all the other races.”

Zoë leaned forward, placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her clasped hands. “Okay, Mr Sutton… As they will be expected to remain in the kitchen area in the lower level, I sincerely doubt they’ll be subjected to the same intense scrutiny as the visitors coming through the main entrance. Make sure their travel cases are outfitted with false compartments so they can sneak a couple of combat knives past security.”

Boris looked at Nina. “Ms Delacroix, can you obtain a pair of chef’s tool cases for them. They’ll need the expected compliment of chef’s tools. And set them up with clothing that’s not too flamboyant… they’re successful French chefs, but not too successful, okay?”

Zoë observed, “There are bound to be metal detectors at all the entryways, so they’ll probably not be able to bring in more than one would expect a chef to own.”

“They won’t be prohibited from keeping their omnitools, Ma’am… recipes have to be readily available… omnitool is the preferred method for storage. That and their skills at hand-to-hand combat should be all they’ll need.”

Jana took the opportunity to speak up. “There are confirmed reports that a new Spectre-flagged vessel has been sighted at the Alliance Docks.” Using her omnitool, she displayed a vid-frame capture on the large screen behind Zoë’s chair. “It appears very similar to an Asari heavy corvette, but it’s longer overall. Unfortunately for us, it was designed and constructed by a private firm on Thessia; we have been unable to discover any of its specs – its propulsion capabilities… armament… type of hull plating or armor – but knowing her captain, my guess is that it is easily equal or superior to a standard Asari destroyer… maybe even a frigate.”

As Zoë studied the ship displayed on the adjacent monitor – SPECTRE emblems boldly emblazoned on the vertical tail – she asked, “That ship is here… now?”

“Yes, but it hasn’t been here the entire time.” Jana’s chuckle was light as she looked meaningfully into the midnight-black eyes regarding her. “I was going to add that the vessel, christened *Knight Shade*, set down at the Alliance VIP docks on the 4th of the month. Given what we’ve discovered and who’s on the guest list, Spectre Shepard will most certainly be attending this party… she and her team disembarked as soon as they arrived.”
Cantrell cycled the vid-still image to display the heavy corvette in the specially designed docking cradle. “I’m sure they made initial contact with the event planners, told them about certain requirements for the protection of Council employees, including the Ambassadors who will be in attendance… and who knows what else… before returning to the CGC. Now, they’re back and inspecting the venue yet again, and I’m fairly confident that Shepard is here to review the constantly evolving security plans with the Alliance team responsible for the event.”

Zoë leaned back in her chair with a heavy sigh. “With Shepard involved, the Alliance security plans may have been superseded by Spectre authority… I imagine her primary goal will be to guarantee the safety of Councilor Osoba, but anything concerning security of the Council-related VIPs could fall under her purview.” Glancing at each of the people before her, she settled her gaze on Cantrell once again as she continued, “Shepard and her team being here will be a blessing and a curse, Jana. Unlike our people, she and her Spectre team will be armored and armed… conspicuously so… and will have free run of the facility and the parade grounds. We will have to exercise a great deal of care to remain unnoticed.”

Zoë continued to look at each of them in turn as she concluded, “Atlas staying away is not an option, people. This is our city… our planet! Shepard may be one of us, but she’s a spacer, and we’ve all had access to the crew list she submitted to the Council; of her entire crew, only five are Human… including her. Our presence there may make a profound difference in any number of ways, but it’s important that we demonstrate that as Humans, we can handle our own problems. We need to exercise an extreme amount of care to ensure our presence has only a positive effect. Let’s complete our research, get the Cousineau sisters embedded in the kitchens and place the rest of our plans in motion.”
Systems Alliance Headquarters, Earth, Sol System – 20 Sep 2188

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Sir.” The irritation in her voice was obvious as Shepard fixed her gaze on the recalcitrant councilor. “I understand the extra precautions are a pain in the ass, but Douglas Walker is not a sniper to ignore. He is an extremely deadly assassin… and now that we have proof of payment, it’s no longer conjecture. Unless we are somehow able to locate and intercept him before he gets to his firing position, he will be there.”

“If he’s as good as you say, why even bother trying?” Osoba scoffed. “If he has avoided capture by everyone sent after him up until now, why would you expect a different outcome this time?”

“That’s exactly my point… and why I want you to wear a vest.” Shepard drew a deep breath in an unsuccessful attempt to calm herself… and to allow her irritation to be swept away by Liara’s soothing presence in the back of her mind.

{You can only do what you can do, Siame. He either accepts the conditions or he does not. We will do the best we can with what we have to work with.}

Shrugging in surrender, Shepard admitted, “Honestly? I don’t expect anyone will find him in advance… which is exactly why I gave Sharon Culver a heads-up that I’m heading down to Rio tomorrow; I’ll speak with her in person, once I finish up the week-out check on the final ceremony preparations in Vancouver. Under the circumstances, we need security specialists, not your average Marine guards.”

Her tone changed, the frustration with the entire situation coloring her tone as she continued, “Especially when there are so many with dubious connections… who are somehow keeping their assignments at the Headquarters, of all places… and who we have not yet finished vetting.”

“Which is exactly why they are remaining at their jobs… because merely attending a meeting or being a party member is still not against the law, Shepard! You have not provided me with even a shred of evidence that any of the people on that list are involved with a terrorist faction of what are generally considered legitimate political parties. Earth First and Terra Firma have been around for decades… without any form of violence being associated with them.” Osoba stood up from his desk while he spoke and started pacing. “The damned Reaper War changed that somehow, but you can’t condemn the mainline party simply because of a few radical offshoots which may have formed
during all the chaos.”

“The dynamics have changed because the radical leaders of Cerberus… and LEAP… were eliminated, along with a majority of their members.” She massaged her temples with thumb and fingers of one hand as she attempted to rein in the stress headache she could feel developing. Dropping her hand, she skewered Osoba with icy-green eyes and concluded, “This isn’t some small radical offshoot, Sir!” Shepard growled, “It’s fucking Charles Saracino!”

“Until you can produce irrefutable evidence supporting your allegation that Mr Saracino is party to that contract, Spectre, you are committing slander…” Osoba ceased his pacing; returning Shepard’s frigid gaze with laser focus, he ordered, “… and you will take absolutely no action against Mr Saracino or Terra Firma until I give you approval to do so! Is that clearly understood, Spectre Shepard?”

“Yes, Sir.” Shepard clamped her jaw tightly closed for several moments before adding, “Given that, I’ll tell you this now, so you have time to prepare whatever disciplinary action you deem necessary; if Walker kills anyone at that dedication… during which I’m going to do my damnedest to make sure it isn’t you… all bets are off.”

“By all means, Shepard.” After a long morning of seemingly futile discussion, Samantha was surprised when Osoba finally agreed with something she said. The man hardly took a break to breathe before he continued, “But, if he does shoot someone, you will also do your damnedest to make sure that man is apprehended… alive. Then, you make sure he tells us who hired him.” The Councilor huffed and shook his head. “And, if it just so happens to be either Saracino or someone in his organization, then we can have this discussion again and I may be more willing to give you free rein… depending on the strength of his statement and exactly who he implicates in the plot.”

“What do you mean, who he implicates? Why does that matter?”

“You’ll need to verify his information, obviously…” Osoba finally made his way back to his desk and plopped down in his chair; mentally jousting with the Spectre made him more than simply tired; she was exhausting. “… but if he reveals someone high in Alliance Command, the burden of proof I will need before I let you begin arresting people will be much greater.”

“So, an accusation against an admiral carries less credence than one against a member of an adversarial political party?” Shepard narrowed her eyes and continued, “I respectfully disagree, Sir… It most certainly does not. I am tired of our own people playing politics with our hard-won victory, so I don’t give a shit who it is. If I get a name, I don’t give a Pyjak’s ass if it’s Charles Saracino, the Prime Minister or my own mother; I will not play favorites and I will bring them in for questioning.”

Osoba closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, sighing, “Do you have any idea how foolish this infighting makes us look to the Council, Shepard?”

Shepard’s response was a derisive snort, followed by, “Yes, Sir, I do. It makes us appear exactly like the militant, back-stabbing, injudicious species who hasn’t reached the level of maturity required for full and equal participation on the galactic stage; we are rapidly becoming who the naysayers within the Galactic Council believe us to be.” She growled in disgust, continuing, “As much as I hate to admit it, we are doing an excellent job of proving their initial impressions of us to be correct!” She suddenly spun on her heel and stalked toward the door as she snarled in parting, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Councilor, I have a job to do… which you seem Hell-bent on making more impossible by the day.”
The third Sunday of the month had dawned with the promise of rain to come; the sun had briefly appeared between the horizon and the leaden clouds that hung low over the city. Mottled in a myriad of shades ranging from light to dirty-grey, they promised the sort of light drizzle that seemed incapable of ever dampening anything, until one had to stand outside without benefit of shelter for longer than 15 or 20 minutes.

The rather long raised platform from where dignitaries and special guests would be speaking was sheltered by a substantial – albeit temporary – canopy supported by several tubular ‘A’ frames spaced evenly beneath its length; there were a number of similar structures, all placed in orderly rows in front of the platform, so the people gathered for the solemn dedication of the newly rebuilt structure could sit in relative comfort as they listened and reflected on the devastation begun just two years ago.

Zoë Lawrence and Tim Stafford had been admitted to the grounds as part of a pre-dedication tour being presented by the Alliance Defense Committee. Of course, gaining access to the building and parade grounds meant carrying no weapons and having to deposit their omnitools in individual containers, to be returned when they left the grounds. With the major portion of the tour complete, they both stood in front of the rows of portable chairs, slowly turning in place as they covertly inspected the layout of the canopies and parade ground. Zoë whispered, knowing the comms unit hidden in her left ear would pick up her words as if she was speaking normally. “Why the Hell did they place all these damned canopies here? Wouldn’t a kinetic barrier have kept everyone dry just as well?”

“Come next Sunday, they’ll have a barrier in place over this entire area,” came Stafford’s confident reply. Without looking up, he continued, “Emitters are in the upper corners and along the inner edge of the parapet. Thing is, the barrier will deflect a moderate rain shower, but it won’t even begin to turn a bullet… of any kind… whereas the canopies will make it more challenging for someone to get a target lined up in their sights.”

Zoë sighed heavily in reply. “Trust me, Tim; any sharpshooter worthy of the title would find a way to make an effective shot.” She calmly watched as people continued to enter the compound to meander around the area before leaving, commenting, “I haven’t seen Shepard or the commandos. Shouldn’t they already be here?”

Tim nudged the side of her hip with the back of his hand, using his chin to subtly direct her attention towards a rather substantial looking doorway, about a third of the way along the wall behind the platform. The subject of their brief conversation appeared in the open doorway; after appearing to study the entire area, Shepard’s neutral expression hardened as her glacial green eyes locked onto the midnight browns belonging to Zoë Lawrence.

If she had been expecting Zoë to turn tail and run, her disappointment did not show; instead, she calmly walked around the platform and approached the Atlas Executive Director. Stopping a meter away, she nodded slightly in Zoë and Tim’s direction as a pair of familiar looking Asari came walking up to them from either side; Liara T’Soni and Riana Iregos each stopped to stand watch at a distance similar to Shepard’s.

Zoë made a show of looking at each of Shepard’s comrades before returning her attention to the auburn-haired woman standing on a cocked hip in front of her. “Spectre Shepard. It is nice to see you once again.” Glancing again at the two Asari on either side of her, she observed, “You must think I have a death wish, Spectre.” With a smirk playing across her lips, she added, “You have nothing to fear… from either of us.”
Samantha glanced at her companions before crossing her arms under her chest. “I’m sorry I cannot say I am pleased to see you again… especially today.” Her tone was cool as she asked, “Not that I would expect an honest answer, but exactly how are you here? I’m pretty sure I didn’t see your name…” her mouth was set firmly in a straight line, one corner tipped up ever so slightly, “… any of your names… well, none that I am aware of, anyway… included on the guest list.”

Zoë’s expression was one of wounded astonishment. Remaining absolutely still, she replied, “I can guarantee Zoë Lawrence is the only name you will ever find for me, Spectre. As for how I am here, our information officer ‘jacked’ the database being used to keep track of people sending their regrets… before their replies were able to arrive at party central. She was able to appropriate those identities and deliver ‘will attend’ replies in their names. It pains me to admit it, but our electronic invitations are forgeries.”

Slowly bringing up an open hand, she spread her fingers wide as she placed the hand in the center of her chest, grinning as she continued, “Despite your utter lack of respect for me – in my own city, no less – I can assure you I am merely here for the same reasons as you and your team. I vowed that Atlas would not hesitate to defend any and all, Human, or…” at this point, she looked directly at Liara, “… Alien, from extreme views such as those espoused by LEAP. It’s good to remember what we lost, don’t you agree?”

Shepard clasped her hands behind her back and responded in a very matter-of-fact manner. “You do realize I could have you and your friend arrested and removed from this place, Zoë… which would certainly prevent you from attending the dedication next weekend. Convince me it’s in the best interest of the Alliance and Galactic Council to permit you to stay.” The Spectre studied the quizzical expression on Zoë’s tattooed face for a moment before turning her attention to Tim. “As for you, don’t even think I’ve forgotten your January visit to Jessica Mikhailovich’s home in New York.” Shifting her gaze back to Zoë, she indicated Tim with a motion of her head as she added, “This man was one of the three that held Mikhailovich while you slowly shoved a straight blade into her heart… a dagger that looked remarkably similar to the bloody knife that was left lying on the table in front of Udina during the war.”

Zoë glanced at Tim as she replied off-handedly to Shepard’s accusation, “As I mentioned when we spoke on the CGC, ending Mikhailovich’s life was entirely necessary, Captain; it was a task in which I took absolutely no pleasure.” Returning her gaze to the auburn-haired woman studying her, she raised her empty hands, her expression hardening ever so slightly. “Unlike you, my companion and I are completely unarmed, even though we’re here for the same reason as you and your friends… to find and stop any assassins targeting Osoba, Hackett, Trost or Hoffman.”

Samantha quickly schooled her expression of astonishment at Zoë’s statement regarding her presence. Taking two quick steps, she placed her face within half-a-meter of Zoë’s… close enough to make out the individual needle marks left behind by the tattoo gun. In a harsh whisper, she asked, “What makes you think you could successfully stop a determined attacker?”

Zoë countered with, “You’re just one person, Shepard. You have a team, yes, but what makes you so damned certain that my help… my assistance… is unnecessary? Everyone I’m bringing to this little soiree next week is an experienced soldier. With the exception of Tim and myself, you won’t even know who they are, unless something bad happens.”

Shepard’s expression shifted to one of astonishment at what she had just been told. It was becoming increasingly apparent to the Spectre that Zoë Lawrence… despite her past deeds when she had worked for Cerberus as Maya Brooks, was really attempting to turn her life around… to somehow make amends for all the misery and grief she had caused. After studying the liquid midnight eyes for a number of tense moments, Shepard decided to place a bit of trust in the woman yet again.
Motioning towards Liara with a look as she drew back from the leader of Atlas, she took a deep breath to center herself before breathing out softly, “I told you to never cross me, or the law again, Ms Lawrence. You seem to be rather close to doing the latter, especially since your presence here today is only possible through the use of forged invitations.”

Shepard looked down at her booted feet, shaking her head slightly as if in denial of what she was about to do. “That said, I’ll keep your true identity to myself, and I won’t say anything that will get you or your companions barred from the dedication.” The Spectre placed her hands on her hips as she concluded, “The upcoming ceremonies are a real chance for you to actually prove yourself to me, Zoë. It’s the only chance I will ever grant you, so don’t waste it.” Lifting her head, she again moved closer to Zoë so she could speak softly. “Just to be clear, if you’re being anything other than straight with me, or if anyone on your team does anything untoward, my hunt for you will know no boundaries, Zoë Lawrence… and when I catch you, I will end your life.”

“Of that, I have no doubt, Spectre… but I’m promising you right now that you’ll never have to worry about it.” Zoë smiled as she responded in a near whisper. “Since you recognized Tim from our visit to Jessica’s penthouse in January, I’ll repeat what I said that night… what I told you when you walked up. Our sole purpose is to defend Humans and Aliens from extreme views such as those espoused by people such as Charles Saracino, or… Douglas Walker.”

Shepard’s mouth dropped for only a second before she responded, “How in Hell do you know of Walker?”

Zoë made eye contact with Liara for a moment before turning back to face the Spectre. “Do you really believe Lady T’Soni is the only accomplished info broker in the galaxy? Atlas has a very competent team of data miners. Why else would we be here today, Shepard? Saracino responded to Walker’s letter, though probably not in the positive manner that bastard would have liked; I have no doubt the son of a bitch will make a long-range attempt on one of the four principals due here next Sunday.” Zoë was nearly nose-to-nose with the woman, close enough to count the freckles on her cheeks. In a harsh whisper, she added, “And while Atlas truly decimated LEAP’s membership last January, those sympathetic to their ideals… and to the ideals of Cerberus… still manage to elude us… avoid our notice… and many of those xenophobes are members of the Alliance military.

Shepard did a good job of concealing her surprise, especially considering Liara’s comment through the link. {Goddess, Samantha! Didn’t you recently remind me that Cerberus represented an ideal rather than an organization?}

“I realize that… and sincerely pray we are both wrong in that speculation, Ms Lawrence.” With a sigh, Shepard concluded, “I have to get back to it. I pray to the gods that all my preparations… and yours, apparently… have been made for no good reason. To think that Humans would actually still be targeting Humans just to further some ill-advised cause to see our species raised up to rule over the other races…” She paused, leaving the thought unfinished as she slowly turned on her heel and walked back to the other side of the raised platform, to be rejoined by Liara and Riana.

As they came together, Riana hissed, “How can you even begin to trust that woman, Nara?”

The Spectre sighed as she looked at the commando and replied, “Because I must, Riana. It is obvious we are destined to cross each other’s paths now… and in the future. You might think I’m crazy… perhaps I am… but I just looked into her eyes and saw absolutely no indications of deceit. She is no longer Maya Brooks, or Rasa, or any of the other aliases she used in the past in order to cover her tracks. I honestly believe she is a different person, Riana.” Shepard placed a closed fist in the center of her chest. “My heart is frightened by what that woman can take from me if I’m wrong… but my logical side is telling me Zoë Lawrence is the genuine article… I am coming to
believe she truly cares about our relations with the rest of the galaxy’s races.”

Riana still wasn’t ready to concede. “She tried to put a bullet in you on the Citadel… she…”

“… then turned around and saved me on the Crucible.” Samantha placed a hand on her fellow vanguard’s upper arm as she interrupted. “As Maya Brooks, Riana. Since then, she has purposely placed herself in a position where I could have easily taken her life… twice.” Shepard looked down for a moment, then looked back into the Asari’s eyes. “I am tired of having to be suspicious of everyone I meet. People can change, Riana. I’ve seen it… if you need a solid example, look no farther than Miranda Lawson.”

Zoë sighed, a mixture of frustration and grudging admiration evident in her tone as she turned to Tim and said, “That could have gone a Hell of a lot better, but at least she didn’t kick us out… or worse, arrest us… to prohibit us from attending the dedication next weekend.”

Tim nodded as he moved close to Zoë’s side. He noticed her shoulders stiffen at his approach, so refrained from touching her as he whispered just centimeters from her ear, “Maya Brooks was her nemesis during the war, as dangerous in her eyes as Kai Leng… or Jack Harper. No matter how many times Atlas intervened in LEAP’s attempts to kill her and her Asari partner, I believe she will never be able to completely overcome her antipathy towards you… for good or ill, Harper’s murder of Admiral Anderson before she vented the bastard’s head may be something that will forever be a wedge between you.”

Tim sighed as he backed away from her personal space. “All you can do is what you’re doing right now, Zoë… persist in showing her that the only threat you or me or Atlas presents… to anyone… is aimed at the xenophobes that continue to make Humanity look like shit to the rest of the galaxy’s races.”

Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 21 Sep 2188

“Why the fuck don’t we ever see one another anymore unless the galaxy is going to Hell?” Culver sat in the chair across from Shepard, beer in her hand and feet up on the table between them. Her eyes shifted to the blue-skinned being sitting beside Sam on the couch. “And you know I have absolutely nothing to do with this mess that has dragged you back early from your honeymoon… So, you didn’t go off and rescind her permission to take that damned vacation with me, did you?”

Liara laughed softly, a warm smile crossing her lips even with the underlying seriousness of the conversation at hand. “No, Sharon, I most certainly did not.” She paused and glanced at her bondmate, obviously conversing quickly via the link before turning back to the Alliance Colonel. “You know, we are planning an extended celebration at the Estate for this upcoming Christmas, assuming the Quarian situation is resolved by then… or, at least, doesn’t explode in our faces during our holiday. Hannah and Karin are planning to be there… along with Kahlee, if they can somehow manage to drag the Dean away from Grissom Academy. We would really love for you to join us… at least for a few days?”

“Dean?” Sharon’s eyes lit with approval. “So, they finally got around to confirming Kay for the full-time position?”

“It was Shepard’s turn to laugh. “Yes. It only took them a year to finally realize it wasn’t going to look like favoritism… just because I consider her my aunt.” Her expression turned sober as she
continued, “Apparently, Kahlee’s rather… vigorous… defense of me at that first Victory Tour speech in London got a lot of play during the confirmation discussions. People started to figure out the connection between us… and, unfortunately, Kay’s private life with Uncle Dave became public knowledge.”

Scowling, Sharon retorted, “It’s none of their Goddamned business! If they didn’t know about it while it was happening, it means she and the Admiral kept it discrete. Why should they even give a fuck, especially now? It’s ancient history, as far as I’m concerned.”

“That’s pretty much what Kahlee told them…” Shepard snickered and continued, “… only she managed to avoid using foul language to explain it… not that it mattered any longer with Uncle Dave…” Sam’s voice hitched slightly at the memories, “… Uncle Dave’s death.”

Slightly red in the face, both from her angry outburst and a hint of embarrassment, Sharon replied in a less belligerent tone, “Well… good. Good. I suppose all’s well that ends well, right?” She shook her head and returned to the current topic. “So, anyway. Christmas. I’ll put in for the leave time and, assuming it’s approved, you can count me in. It will be great to have a few days without any responsibilities, for sure… some down time to simply catch up.”

“Excellent!” Liara’s genuine smile immediately told Sharon the Asari had no reservations about her joining them for the holiday. “Obviously, we have plenty of room, so no need to make arrangements for accommodations… and we’ll have a car or shuttle available to you, should you need one.”

“As a matter of fact, don’t worry about travel at all,” Shepard added. “We’ll come grab you, either in a shuttle or with the Aletheia.”

“Transportation is easy.” Sharon smiled at them both. “How about I hop to the CGC on the daily courier shuttle run? Then, you can get both your mom and me with a single stop?” Her smile turned into a smirk as she raised a single eyebrow and added, “Unless, of course, you need me to run an op to ‘kidnap’ Kahlee. If need be, I could always make sure she comes to the party…”

“You do that, you’d better be ready to accept the consequences!” Shepard was grinning ear-to-ear as she joked, “There’s a lot of determination in that slim little body… and I do believe she would never let you live it down.”

“I imagine not.” Sharon flashed one last smile before dropping her feet to the floor and leaning forward in her chair. “So, regarding this bullshit surrounding the dedication. What exactly do you need me to do?” Her eyes flitted between Shepard and Liara and they had no doubt she had shifted back to the main reason for their visit as she asked, “I am assuming you want me and my guys out of uniform… and outside the fence?”

Serrice Guard Headquarters, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 22 Sep 2188

Serrice Guard Captain Lydia D’Naga had spent the past week discretely vetting her personnel and selecting an elite squad from the many loyalists who still backed her. Of the 250 commandos of the Guard, there were only ten who were firmly in Niaso’s camp, with another twenty or so leaning in that direction… leaving Lydia with many to choose from. In the end, she selected only three lieutenants and fifteen huntresses to form three separate teams. That way, each squad was monitoring one of the three criminals to ensure none of them could somehow manage to elude capture should they catch wind of their upcoming arrest.

D’Naga wanted to start by cleaning her own house first, to which the Spectre had no objections. To
that end, when T’Dura arrived at the Serrice Guard headquarters, the first group moved immediately to the office of the Deputy Commander, Lieutenant Alestia Niaso. The Guard squad cordoned off the area while T’Dura and D’Naga marched in to promptly inform the Lieutenant that she was under arrest; the list of charges consisted of conspiracy for the attempted murder of Huntress Sikara Mendaras, denying Asari their lawful right to free assembly, and criminal negligence resulting in the deaths of three Asari citizens.

“You have no right!” Alestia sneered at D’Naga and laughed. “You were in charge, so it is your career in the Guard that will be over. All because you are a coward who is unwilling to do what needs to be done! My mother is going to bury you!”

Lydia shook her head in antipathy and glanced over at the Spectre. “Did I not tell you that even when she was faced with the charges… when she should realize they had broken laws bigger than those of their personal little playground of Serrice and their actions had caught the attention of a Spectre… that she would still deny what they did was wrong?”

T’Dura shrugged with indifference. “Honestly, the only reason I am here is because I have other matters to attend to on Thessia. Once this offense was also brought to my attention, I considered it too egregious to let it wait until the Justicars had time to get around to it. They are occupied arresting those who have been found guilty of Asari war crimes…”

Realizing this wasn’t any normal shake-down, Alestia raised her omnitool and started typing as she growled, “I’m calling the Matriarch.” She suddenly screeched in pain and ripped the device off her arm as it sparked and caught fire on her wrist. “What in the blazes?”

One of the Guard squad members, a Sentinel, replied ominously, “That is not going to happen, Niaso, because your mother is next… and I do not want you tipping her off before the honorable Spectre can get to the Ministry to arrest her, as well.”

As Alestia stared at her former teammates in shock, Captain D’Naga smiled with gratification and stated, “Now. Turn yourself over to the Spectre without a fuss… or not, if that is truly your desire… because I would absolutely love an excuse to beat you down for everything you and the Matriarch have done to corrupt the Serrice Guard, Lieutenant. Please… give me an excuse.”

The lieutenant walked over to the Spectre and stuck her arms out, wrists close enough together to be handcuffed as she sneered, “Fuck you, D’Naga. Your time will come.”

“As it will for all of us eventually.” T’Dura placed the biotic suppression cuffs on Niaso’s wrists and shoved her toward the Sentinel. “Only, some of us are more secure in our reception by the Goddess than others.” Directing her attention to the squad’s Lieutenant, she added, “Keep the cuffs on and place her in a holding cell while I collect the rest. I imagine it won’t take very long.” Her eyes shifted to the Captain. “You coming?”

Lydia’s face held a satisfied smile as she responded, “Wouldn’t miss this for anything, Spectre.”

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Ministry of Justice Chambers, Serrice, Thessia – 22 Sep 2188

Spectre T’Dura strode into the office of the Justice Minister, only to be confronted by two guards, moving quickly from the doorway to Galalina’s inner sanctum to intercept the Spectre and stop her in her tracks. “I need to see Matriarch Galalina immediately.”

“I am afraid she is participating in a vid meeting, at present, and cannot be disturbed.” The lead
guard eyed the Spectre suspiciously. "May I ask what this is about?"

"First, I have to wonder how you managed to miss the Council Spectre insignia on my armor… and then, if you actually did take note of it, what part of immediately did you not understand?" T’Dura simply sneered at the armored huntress before her as she added, "... And no, you may not ask; it is Spectre business. You can either get out of my way or be arrested along with her."

"Arrested?" The guard glanced at D’Naga, standing at the left shoulder of the Spectre with a rather smug smile on her face and immediately knew what had happened. "This is because of the attack on Mendaras, isn’t it? I had wondered if she was going to get away with that…" She quickly stepped to the side and dipped her head to both the Captain and the Spectre. "Please… by all means, do not let me interfere with the application of justice."

The second guard refused to yield; instead, she attempted to block their access to the door as she shouted out a warning to Galalina and her personal guard within the office. She was instantly paid back for her loyalty… by being shot in the back as a hail of weapons-fire erupted through the closed door, those within showing no concern for who may have been standing outside of it.

Her unintentional sacrifice bought Lydia and Moises the critical seconds they needed to avoid injury by diving behind cover. The Spectre immediately shouted, "You are only making this harder on yourself, Matriarch! I am Council Spectre T’Dura… and you will either yield to me or die here today. The choice is yours!"

She was answered by yet another hail of gunfire, only to glance across the room to see a grinning Captain D’Naga waving to get her attention. Shifting to the private comm frequency they had agreed on, she queried, "What have you got?"

Lydia’s voice was almost gleeful as she quietly reported what she had learned. "Only the guards are in the offices… Galalina is in the process of descending via the fire-escape on the outside of the building with her First. Lieutenant Sanni has her in her sights and wants to know if she should take the shot."

T’Dura rattled off a quick series from her Spectre Paladin before answering, "The matriarch does not deserve such a quick death, nor the martyrdom she would achieve." As another round erupted from within, Moises continued, "We will keep the guards busy here… Sanni. Shoot Galalina’s First and take her out of the equation. I imagine the matriarch may be a bit more… submissive… if her defender is dead."

"Captain?" The hesitant voice of the lieutenant asked much with that single-word query.

A dozen questions flashed through D’Naga’s head in that instant. First, Lydia knew the young sniper was questioning the Spectre’s authority to order her to do such a thing, particularly regarding the legality of the call. Lieutenant Sanni was also looking for permission from her own captain… as well as wanting to know if Lydia agreed with what she had been asked to do.

Her voice somber with the responsibility she was accepting, D’Naga nodded at the Spectre across the room and responded, "She picked the wrong side, Sanni; it makes her a co-conspirator… and the matriarch must be brought to justice." She heaved a heavy sigh. "Preferably before an Asari court rather than at the end of your rifle, so I don’t want the minister’s death on your hands. And, you don’t have to kill Arenia… just incapacitate her. Wait until the fall won’t kill her and take the shot, Sanni; I’ve got your back."

Gunfire continued to be exchanged between those within and those outside of the office until the sharp bark of a sniper rifle was followed by a panicked scream and a thud, as the First fell the last
few meters to the ground. Shouts of dismay quickly followed as D’Naga switched back to the Guard channel and explained to those inside the office what had just happened.

“You have a choice… surrender or die… because none of you are free to walk away from this,” Lydia growled. “There will be consequences, because you had to know what she was doing was wrong… yet you stood by and allowed it to happen. Defended her, even, during the planning phases and the execution of the raid. I am backed in this action by a Council Spectre; do not compound your crimes by resisting arrest.”

Only a few moments passed before they were answered by the heavy thud of weapons hitting the floor, just before the left-hand door opened slowly, a single, unarmed guard at the entry. She had one hand on the doorknob, the other in the air as she practically whispered, “We surrender. Please don’t kill me.” She opened the double doors fully, enough for the Spectre and Captain to see that everyone in the room was unarmed and kneeling, hands clasped behind their necks in submission. She then placed her own hands behind her head and dropped to her knees, mimicking the position the others had already assumed, as she stated, “The matriarch seemed so righteous… said she was acting on orders.”

D’Naga gasped, suddenly fearing that, perhaps, T’Dura was actually correct about the Serrice Defense Minister not playing by the rules. She feared the answer to the question, yet had to ask, “Orders? From whom?”

“Defense Minister Rahula, of course.” The guard looked confused by the captain’s question. “Who else would have the authority to order us to do such a thing?”

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Ministry of Justice Chambers, Serrice, Thessia – 22 Sep 2188

Defense Minister Rahula terminated the call and peered out her window, confirming the information she had just received. “Goddess be damned!”

Her First, Sentinel Fayna Shyria, looked over when she heard the tone of the matriarch’s unusually harsh exclamation. “Minister?”

“We have been discovered after all, Fayna.” Rahula walked quickly to her desk and opened a bio-coded security drawer, withdrawing a holstered Acolyte pistol from its depths. “Apparently, a Council Spectre is already on her way here, aided by the Serrice Guard, to take me into custody.” She slipped the belt around her waist and pulled the pistol, checking its ammunition load and holstering the weapon again before slinging a spare belt of grenades over her neck. She then glanced up to meet Shyria’s eyes. “That is not going to happen. Not today.” Her focus turned to her computer system, where she immediately initiated a purge program.

“But, you were cleared by the Justicar inquisition! What grounds does this Spectre have for your arrest?” Shyria checked her own weapons as she spoke, moving to a hidden panel and opening a secure weapons locker. “Seeing as you glanced out the window, I assume we are headed for the carport on the roof?”

“Yes. A Guard team is already stationed below, so we won’t be going out the front without great difficulty. Even though I disagree with turning over all of the Prothean technology to the Council, I am not prepared to kill our own Guard members to secure my escape… not unless I am forced to do so.”

“Of course.” The First looked confused. “Who could have possibly tipped off this Spectre?”
“Only Cyla would have been in a position to do so, but I do not believe she did. For some reason, Spectre T’Dura was present at the Governess Council… and I vaguely remember Cyla mentioning something about her appearing rather disgruntled at the Justicar findings.” The matriarch watched as the program she was running finished wiping the files from her computer. “I’m done here. I simply need to initiate the cipher program to ensure none of these files can ever be recovered. It will take more time than we have here to complete… so I simply need to hope they cannot hack past my screen lock before it is finished.” A few more strokes across the haptic interface and the screen went blank. Rahula sighed in resignation and looked to her First. “Time for us to leave, Shyria.”
Ministry of Justice Chambers, Serrice, Thessia – 22 Sep 2188

Spectre T’Dura guided the aircar onto the roof’s central landing zone. “Good. It appears that all the spaces are occupied, so perhaps the minister is still in the building.”

D’Naga nodded in agreement. “Lieutenant Selura just confirmed that the Minister has not attempted to leave the area… at least not at ground level.”

“Most excellent.” The Spectre stopped and keyed a short code-string into her omnitool; hearing an audible ‘click,’ indicating the roof door lock had been successfully disengaged, she closed the interface as she looked at D’Naga one last time before opening the door, asking, “You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be to arrest the most senior member in my chain-of-command.” Lydia took a deep breath and blew it out as she pulled her pistol – an M-77 Paladin.

Surprised by a Serrice Guard having a weapon from Spectre Requisitions, T’Dura couldn’t help but ask, “How do you happen to possess a Spectre weapon, D’Naga?”

Chuckling, the Guard captain responded, “I know it is a well-kept secret, but I am surprised you did not realize Serrice Technology produces more than biotic amplifiers and weapons modules… including items such as the Spectre M-77. As a courtesy, they provide their own defenders with the same high-tech weaponry… like those in the Serrice Guard. Now, are we going or chatting?”

“Right.” T’Dura grinned, thinking she could actually come to like this Guard Captain, no matter the circumstances of their original meeting. She slipped the door open a crack and listened; hearing nothing, she opened it just wide enough to slip through with D’Naga following close behind. Whispering, “The Defense Minister’s office is on the ninth floor, six levels down. Between here and there are a number of Ministry offices…”

She was cut off by Lydia’s muffled chuckle as the captain whispered back. “I come here all the time, Spectre… I think I know the layout of the building – likely better than you.” She paused briefly before adding, “The barracks is in the basement, which would be a great place for Rahula to
hide for a terrorist attack or something similar, but it has no escape routes for this scenario. Given that, the only other troublesome floor would be the twelfth… it houses the main detective branch, with several armed officers present at any given time, conducting criminal interrogations and witness interviews. If Rahula is looking for potential help, that is the only place within this building from which any would be available.”

“Understood.” T’Dura finally reached back and unclipped the non-descript SMG Lydia had seen on the Spectre’s back docking port.

“What is that thing? I don’t recognize it.”

“That’s because it no longer possesses its Blood Pack colors and has been heavily modified.” The Spectre rotated the weapon in her hand, once again admiring its surprising balance, a quality unexpected in a weapon produced by a Krogan gunsmith. “It’s a Punisher Ultralight… one which I acquired from a dirt-bag crime lord on Tarith; he couldn’t get miners to come work on that stinking planet voluntarily, so he resorted to slavery. When he raided an Asari colony… well, I responded with violence and ended his operation… and him. As for the Punisher, it’s easy to handle, packs a punch and is as accurate as any assault rifle in close-quarters… at just over half the weight.”

The two Asari had been descending the stairs rapidly as they spoke and had reached the noted twelfth floor without incident. Just as Lydia went to open the doorway to stick her head in, attempting to determine if Rahula had already gone in to ask for assistance, an Acolyte round ricocheted off the wall from below and rounded the corner, exploding at their feet and ripping down their barriers… and nearly stripping their shields. The round was immediately followed by a warp slamming into the wall at the end of the landing, the resultant explosion finishing off their shields and throwing them backward onto the steps from which they had just descended.

Before they could be attacked again, T’Dura countered quickly, not even bothering to regain her feet; instead, she rolled off the steps and pushed off hard from the wall, sliding across the polished stone floor to the opposite end of the landing, squeezing the trigger of her SMG and sending rounds ricocheting downward through the stairwell. Squeals of surprise and pain echoed upward through the closed space as D’Naga began to call for back-up.

At the same time, the door to the twelfth floor was ripped open by an armed and shielded detective. “Captain!” The surprised detective stopped immediately and queried, “What in the blue blazes is going on out here?”

Lydia answered hastily. “No time for the full story… I’m escorting a Spectre to arrest Defense Minister Rahula, guilty of withholding Prothean Crucible tech from the Council – an act of omission that nearly cost all of us our lives during the Reaper War.” As another round of weapons’ fire was exchanged, she glibly added, “The Minister is obviously resisting arrest.”

The detective stared at her Captain and the Spectre in surprise. “Is it just the two of you?”

“No… we have a squad outside… and two more enroute… to keep Rahula and Shyria from leaving the building.” Her chatter was repeatedly interrupted as she continued to exchange fire with those trapped in the stairwell below. “This cannot end with a long-term hunt, Detective. It is ending today, one way or another.”

The detective nodded and opened her omnitool. “Fayna. This is Micky… Detective Micalia. I beg you, please, stop defending the minister. The building is surrounded and I can guarantee this will not end well for either of you.”

They were all surprised when they received a response. “But I knew, Micky. One cannot guard the
Minister without having to guard her secrets, as well. I knew about the Beacon and… and I agreed that it was best for Thessia to withhold that knowledge. I am just as guilty as she.”

“I’m sorry Fay… but you cannot possibly still believe that it was for the good of Thessia. Not after all that has happened and what was revealed by Spectre Shepard.” The detective sighed in regret. “The war changed everything. Do you now believe that resisting arrest and getting killed… or killing members of the Serrice Guard so you can escape… is the correct path? Can you honestly say any of this is for the good of Thessia?”

In answer, another warp flew up the stairway, exploding against the wall as the detective, the Spectre and the Guard captain all dived for cover. The explosion was followed quickly by the report of a pistol… and then an ominous silence, broken only by the soft sound of weeping.

T’Dura was the first to move, beginning to creep slowly down the stairway with her shields set to maximum strength and followed close behind by D’Naga and Micalia. One flight down and around the corner, the ruined First sat on the floor, her weapon tossed off to the side as she slumped over the body of Serrice Defense Minister Rahula N’Atchelle. Body wracked with sobs, Fayna choked and gasped as she cried, begging for words of forgiveness that would never come from the lips of her dead mistress.

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The death of a Matriarch, especially one of standing, was no small thing, so several hours and many Council communications later, Spectre T’Dura was finally free to locate an equally exhausted Captain of the Guard. “I’m ready to take your final statement and return you to your offices. If you want to speed things up, we can record the conversation as we fly.”

Stating, “I’m in no rush. I’ve got nothing better to do with my evening,” the Captain turned and made her way to the stairwell, ready and eager to depart from the scene. “The reports I must now write can wait until tomorrow. Besides, I will likely have a better perspective after a good night’s sleep.”

“I do not believe that maintaining a proper perspective is a problem for you.” T’Dura followed her out, trailing by only a step and, as they exited the building onto the rooftop, the Spectre eyed D’Naga with curiosity, repeating what she had heard when the detective had bolted into the stairwell. “The Minister is obviously resisting arrest?” Seriously?” Moises shook her head and grinned as she continued, “Our barriers were devastated by an Acolyte, we were knocked on our asses by a matriarchal warp, and you can deadpan a wisecrack like that? You’ve got some metal in you, Captain. I like that.”

“You like my metal.” Lydia hummed briefly before continuing, “You made a similar comment to me when we first met… though in a different context and under different circumstances.” She opened the door of the car and slid into the passenger seat, T’Dura sliding in on the opposite side and looking over at her. The captain’s eyes were shadowed; it was easy enough to understand why, after all they had been through over the course of the day, but Moises couldn’t help but wonder what was going through the lead commando’s mind.

It wasn’t long before Lydia spoke again. “I initially called you because I knew that Matriarch Galalina was corrupt. It was the most difficult thing I have done since I made Captain… and I had no idea so many other people were going to lose so much as a result of that one call.”

“The other investigations were already done… so, it seems as though the Goddess likely played a role in our meeting.” T’Dura glanced over and quietly added, “You gave me an excuse to come here that did not arouse too much suspicion. Thank you for providing the opening I was looking for.”
She fell silent and started the car, lifting off the roof and turning toward the Guard Headquarters.

“No. Thank you for your prompt response and for the assistance.” Lydia’s eyes came up to meet those of the Spectre; a new fire lit within as she stated, “My day is done. If it is acceptable, I would like you to take me home… and stay for dinner? It is the least I can do, in thanks for your help… and, perhaps, I can find other ways to thank you before we retire for the evening.”

The Spectre’s lips twitched into an expectant smile. “No strings attached?”

“Stress relief,” Lydia answered with a matching grin. “No promises, no commitments; I do not have time to commit to a relationship.”

“Sounds great,” Moises chuckled. “What’s your address?”

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Alliance Military Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 28 Sep 2188

Alliance Marine Corporal Owen Hamilton felt he had scored a jackpot assignment: pulling guard duty for the retired admiral, Steven Hackett. Normally, he would have hated the job on general principles; in fact, he had actually groused about it to his sergeant, who failed to realize his corporal actually wanted the job. Hamilton had carefully managed his apparent unhappiness in order to be assured of not being reassigned at the last minute, as a golden opportunity had been handed to him, gift wrapped and tied up in a shiny bow.

Corporal Hamilton had enlisted in the Marines the day after his eighteenth birthday. He had grown up studying the history of humanity’s interactions with the other races whose very existence had only been revealed when the bird-like Turians had attacked and destroyed a group of Alliance vessels whose crews were innocently attempting to activate a dormant mass relay.

The short-lived war ended when the Citadel Council, consisting of a Turian ‘chicken’, an Asari ‘squid’ and a Salarian ‘frog’ had dictated peace terms – at the point of Turian guns, no less – creating a reputation for Humans as a mindlessly aggressive species while producing a climate of xenophobia among a significant portion of the Alliance populace.

To Hamilton, the other galactic races would never be anything more than a hindrance to Human progress in the galaxy; currently, he had mixed feelings regarding Alliance hero Samantha Shepard, who had led the galactic effort to destroy the Reapers, but had then married (bonded, as the squids called it) a damned blue-skin archeologist. He had followed their publicity-seeking victory tour, particularly when the assassination attempts began. That none had succeeded really stuck in his craw, but until this day, he had never been in a position to act on his own hatred of the Milky Way’s other races, or his increasing revulsion for the squid-loving Captain Shepard.

Shepard’s squid-bitch had escaped having a bullet through her head after the explosion that leveled the western wing of this very building, killing a man Owen had looked up to as a hardline supporter of Humanity’s God-given right to rule the galaxy, not side-by-side with the other races, but leading from the top. He felt no sympathy for the others killed in the explosion, considering them martyrs in the ongoing battle for Human superiority.

Through clandestine contacts, he had learned of the planned attacks on the VIPs scheduled to attend today’s dedication of the newly rebuilt Alliance Northwest Headquarters building. The identity of the other assassins had not been shared, but Hamilton had been told to expect a clear call to action after the ceremonies were complete.
He had been told to target the man he had been assigned to guard against attack – the utter irony of this amused him to no end. To that end, he had decided to switch out his standard sidearm with an M-11 Suppressor. His guard position to the right side and slightly behind the old admiral provided him an excellent view of the VIPs and the people in the audience. Most were human, with a few of the hated chickens scattered about. Biding his time, he attempted to guess which of the other three other men would meet their well-deserved end today.

Zoë Lawrence had been enjoying a glass of iced tea as she spoke with Tim Stafford about the dedication ceremony. She glanced at a doorway in the back wall through which a line of white-jacketed food servers emerged. Each person carried a large open bowl, which Zoë expected would be their salad. As the staff members separated to take their burdens to different parts of the parade grounds, one person made a seeming beeline towards Zoë and Tim. Stopping in front of the pair, Émiléda Cousineau bowed slightly as she quietly spoke. “I will set this salad on the table to your right. There are utensils, napkins and plates there for your use.” With a conspiratorial wink of one eye, she added, “I think you will find it very delicious.”

Zoë softly replied, “Thank you.” The pair followed Émiléda to the table she had indicated; after setting the large bowl down, she bowed again and turned to walk back to the kitchens. Zoë made a pretense of moving the bowl slightly in order to gain a bit more space in which to set their plates. Lifting it slightly had given her fingers access to the recessed flat bottom; with her thumb and two fingers, she quickly released and withdrew each of the daggers secreted there by Ms Cousineau. After a quick look around herself, she placed her dagger in the empty sheath in the top of her boot as Tim mirrored her movements. Filling a plate with a helping of salad, she strolled over to a chair, took a sip of tea and began eating.

Tim had settled beside her; after taking a bite of tomato and cucumber, he observed, “The dressing has an odd taste. Not bad, actually… just… different than what I’ve had before.”

Zoë cast her eyes sideways at him as she took several bites of her own. “Hmmm… Tastes pretty good to me, but I expect I’ve spoiled my tongue by eating too many field rats while attempting to tail someone that needed killin’.”

Tim began to comment on her statement when the sound of a plate full of food clattering off of a chair and falling to the ground came to his ears. From their vantage point, they could both see Reuben Trost going to his knees, cheeks and lips already swollen and puffy looking – hands clutching at his throat, his facial color was rapidly changing from pink to red to purple. “Goddammit, Zoë! We’re too fucking late!” he exclaimed.

Zoë dropped her plate as she spun around to take in everything going on around her. “Get to Hackett… I don’t see his escort!” Spotting Shepard, she knew the Spectre would move to guard Councilor Osoba. That left only… “I’ve got Hoffman! Move it, Tim!”

Tim left her at a dead run as Zoë sprinted across the grass, dodging in and around panicked people. She had jumped over two rows of chairs and was getting close. She heard the call for emergency services in her comms just as she saw a flicker of motion… having spent years using a cloaking shield generator, she knew she had found another assassin. The cloaked figure had almost reached the ambassador, whose attention was on the Prime Minister lying in the grass choking to death. Hollering, “Move, Ambassador!” she redoubled her efforts to intercept the cloaked figure.

As Zoë leaped across the last row of chairs, she saw Hoffman’s two escorts moving… one using his own body as a shield against the shadowy form coming towards him, the other moving towards the assailant. Zoë was closer; completely forgetting the dagger in her boot sheath, she hit the cloaked
Zoë landed on top of the struggling man, who rolled up on a side, reached around Zoë with a surprisingly strong grip and pulled her partially beneath him. A sharp sting of intense pain in her lower left side nearly doubled her over as she cried out and scrambled to find some purchase on his clothing. The knife was withdrawn in an agonizing sideways motion before being used to stab her again near the first cut. The sound of a high-powered rifle echoing from a distance was followed shortly by the nearby chuffing sound of a pistol discharging twice in rapid succession; this caused her assailant to pause in his struggles. Zoë used his hesitation to encircle his neck with both her hands; screaming at the top of her lungs in mixed agony from her wounds and the euphoria fueled by the massive amounts of adrenaline in her system, she attempted to crush his neck as she viciously dug her thumbs as hard as she could into the fragile structure of his larynx.

As the delicate cartilage began to fracture inward, there was a loud thud, followed by the sudden and total relaxation of her adversary. As the man, still cloaked by his shield generator, was dragged off and away from her, she somehow managed to get to her knees, her hands flat on the grass beneath her. Panting from the combined effects of her sprint across the parade grounds, the fight with the unseen assailant and the adrenaline in her system, Zoë quickly wilted, folding down into a fetal position on her right side. She attempted to use her left hand to press against her twice wounded side but discovered the knife that had been used for the second blow was still wedged in place, only the hilt sticking up to mark its location.

NorthAm Bank Building, Vancouver, B.C., Earth – 28 Sep 2188

Douglas Walker had been awake since just before dawn, thanks to the incessant howl of a pair of Alliance A-61 Gunships banking and circling repeatedly past the eastern side of the building on which he had been camped since the 18th. Convinced the Alliance would take no chances with the security of such an obvious platform for a long-range sniper attempt, Walker had carefully ascended the building – from the outside and in broad daylight – by making use of the window-cleaner platform anchor slots built into the exterior paneling of the Northwest face.

He had brought enough field rats and water to sustain him for the ten days he needed to remain hidden from the security forces employed by the bank; the unoccupied top floor, with access to the wrap-around terrace, had a number of storerooms nearby. Walker had been careful to avoid the active motion sensors and cameras as he cautiously explored the empty floor. After choosing a storage compartment with the most direct path to the eastern side of the terrace, he placed the supplies and weapon he had so laboriously brought up the side of the building within.

Over the course of the week following his ascent, he had watched and waited as the level of security was increased. By Monday, building security forces were making regular sweeps of the floor. On Wednesday, four people arrived and took up residence at a hastily assembled command post near the central elevators; apparently employed by the building’s owners, Walker chose to ignore their presence for now. He and his specially equipped rifle didn’t need to be on the terrace until midnight Saturday; he was wearing a cloaking generator expressly modified to mask him visually and eliminate his heat signature. The M-98 Widow – set up on its bipod legs – was covered with a fabric specifically designed to camouflage the weapon, making it appear to be part of the decking that formed the surface of the terrace.

Using a spotting scope to peer down on the parade ground 2482 meters away, he attentively watched as the Alliance guards scanned every person entering the venue. He recognized Zoë Lawrence when she entered; he found it incredible that anyone in their right mind would brand themselves with
a facial tattoo, until he remembered most of the squids from Thessia wore similar markings. *Bitch is trying to emulate them. Too bad her skin isn’t blue,* came the thought.

As the morning faded into midday, Walker carefully looked around. The four security officers had split up into two pairs of people – one pair remained visible, while the other two virtually vanished thanks to some seriously high-end cloaking generators. The visible pair were casually walking around inside the empty office area, concentrating on the stairs and elevators from the levels below. Walker noticed the entry door at the far northeast corner retract; remaining open as it did, it was obvious that one of the cloaked agents was standing on the threshold. The other agent must have stepped out on the terrace; the faint sounds of boots on the rough surface of the terrace was the only indication the man was slowly moving towards Walker’s position. The assassin quietly readied himself.

The cloaked agent stopped about two meters away from Walker’s position, apparently to lean against the top rail and look down at the building and parade ground. After several minutes, Walker heard the boots begin walking back to the northwestern corner. The pair finally went back inside to rejoin their companions. The assassin sighed in relief; he did not wish to be distracted from the task at hand… and having to kill the agent could have compromised the mission in any number of ways, none of which would result in Walker’s target being taken out.

With a final look through his spotting scope, Walker rose from his prone position to kneel behind the big rifle, the majority of its weight supported by a pair of recoil absorbing bipod legs; leaning against the braided horizontal cables that prevented visitors from falling off the terrace, he activated the electronically-stabilized scope and sighted through it. It was apparent the dedication ceremony had concluded; the people were milling about, conversing with each other as a number of white-coated kitchen staff entered the parade grounds bearing large bowls – these would be the salads that would be served before the main entrées.

With a quick glance into the offices, Walker grinned at the utter complacency of the bank’s security contingent. They were guarding against a threat arriving from below, when the threat was already in place, sighting down the barrel of an M-98 Widow for a target.

Right cheek caressing the cool metal receiver, he looked around the parade grounds for his soon-to-be victim. He had been told his assigned target was Councilor Dominic Osoba, but if his primary target proved elusive, Walker was willing to kill any of the other three that presented themselves. He had debated on whether or not to use armor piercing or fragmentation rounds; knowing none of the men would be wearing body armor, he had ultimately decided on a frag round, meant to go in small and come out large. He planned to take the shot when the cry went up for emergency services to respond to a man choking; that man would be Prime Minister Trost, deathly allergic to an ingredient in the salad dressing that everyone else would be enjoying. During all the confusion, retired Admiral Hackett and Ambassador Hoffman would each be dealt with by other agents. Four targets, four deaths… at least, that was the plan.

Locating Osoba, he sighted in on the councilor and held steady, only moving minutely for corrections he needed to make to keep his target centered in the scope. Within a matter of minutes, the urgent call for emergency services came through the earpiece he was wearing to monitor comms… he heard a clatter as the agents inside burst onto the terrace through the northwest corner door to see what was happening. *No help for it,* he thought. *I’ll kill them as soon as I take the shot.*

With Osoba centered in his scope, Walker used his right thumb to activate the helium-neon laser designator fitted beside the optical scope, placing an intense green dot in the middle of the councilor’s chest. He took his last normal breath for several moments, exhaled slowly, then paused at the end of his exhale for a two-count to ensure his sight picture was rock-steady; his right index
finger gently teased the trigger of the 39-kilogram weapon and the sharp bark of the rifle’s report rolled over him in diminishing waves. Just before releasing the weapon to rise to his feet, he thought he had seen a shadow in his scope, crossing from left to right, but didn’t have the luxury of time to double check. Aiming his M-25 Hornet at the visible pair of agents who were turning towards him in shocked disbelief, he began firing as fast as he could pull the trigger; unfortunately for Walker, they immediately energized their kinetic barriers, preventing the three-round AP-enhanced bursts from killing them outright. They both hit the deck and scrambled back into the offices.

After emptying the clip, he jacked the heat sink and stood still for a moment in order to be sure no one else was coming to investigate. With a regretful, longing look at his customized rifle, he turned and ran for the southeast corner of the terrace, just as more security personnel began to pour into the offices from the access stairwell. Still fully cloaked, he leaped into the air and over the barrier as he reached the far corner of the terrace. Extending his arms and spreading his legs apart, he invisibly glided down and away from the building, his specially designed wingsuit keeping his descent towards the ground at a manageable rate; the added weight of the 39-kg rifle would have had him falling like a rock. By the time he touched down, he’d be three to four kilometers from the NorthAm Bank Building, well outside of the Alliance’s exclusion perimeter.

Walker’s only regret was the security agents’ presence; he could have cared less about having to eliminate them, but they had cost him precious time… time that meant he’d been unable to witness the aftermath of his shot… to confirm his kill and still ensure a successful escape.

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Alliance Military Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 28 Sep 2188

Against Shepard’s advice, Councilor Dominic Osoba insisted on moving towards a crowd of people – other spectators to the dedication ceremony – who were blocking his view of something that was significant enough to elicit cries for a medic. Against her better judgment, Spectre Shepard allowed her respect for the man’s position to override her military training and, in spite of an active threat and her directive to protect Osoba’s life at all cost, merely grumbled under her breath about his stubbornness. She had no choice but to follow as he turned and started to walk away; the determined councilor was chuckling as he walked, sure he heard her mumble something about curiosity killing the cat.

When they arrived at the edge of the growing throng of people, they could both see through the crowd; Prime Minister Reuben Trost was on his knees in the grass, hands clutching at his throat as his airway was apparently being slowly but surely closed off by… what? Shepard could see the man appeared to be choking; his cheeks looked swollen and his entire face had gone from a blush to beet red in a matter of seconds and was now progressing toward a rich shade of deep purple.

Cries for help were coming from within the crowd, even as she heard yet another request for emergency services in her ear-mounted comms unit. Turning back from the distraction to look at Osoba, she was horrified to discover an intense dot of green light, virtually stationary on the man’s chest.

With memories of the near death by a sniper’s bullet of her Ionúin Álainn – in this very city, exactly one year prior, to the day she called on her biotics and utilized a shortened form of the Vanguard charge; she simply flash-stepped, covering the short distance in less than the space of a heartbeat, and moved into position to purposely place herself between the shooter and Osoba. She didn’t have time to warn the man… unable to say anything as her upper back was struck, just left of center, by what felt like a Krogan charging at full speed.

All she could do was exhale with a heavy grunt, the forceful impact violently shoving her forward as
needles of pain shot down her left arm and up the back of her exposed head. She smashed into the
councilman, taking them both to the ground, with her full weight falling on top of him, even as a
loud, booming report from a high-powered rifle reached the parade grounds and echoed about for
several moments.

Liara had been in Operations with Riana and Traynor, watching the heads-up display from
Shepard’s armor camera. The Spectre’s vitals had suddenly spiked, just before they saw the world
turn into a blur when Shepard flash-stepped and then grunted from the impact. The screen went
dark, just as the commander called into her comms, “Fuck! Liara! Evac… Now!”

As Shepard began to push herself upwards in order to relieve Osoba of her weight, the sounds of a
pair of small-caliber gunshots came to her ears; she immediately dropped back down to her left
elbow to better shield Osoba and felt another jolt of considerable pain travel up her arm and into her
shoulder, but not enough to keep her from protecting the councilor.

{Samantha? Are you alright? What just happened?}

{Something slammed into me… really hard in the back. Probably a Widow shot meant to kill the
Councilor. We can thank the Gods Walker apparently opted against an AP round.} Another shot,
muffled somehow, rang out. Speaking into her comms system, she added, “More shots… three total,
I think… maybe four. Gods be damned, Blue. I think every one of the four VIPs has been targeted.
We need to get Osoba out of here! Where’s the extraction team?”

“Liv is in the Jiris… Get to the north entrance and she’ll be on the ground waiting for you,
immediately outside the cordon area. No one is with her, so all three of you can board. Tra’ana is
on her way to you with the rest of the team.”

“Roger that.” Shepard looked across the still-prone Osoba, to see a very attentive Riley Emerson
hunkered down beside the councilor’s head; the Aide de Camp had his sidearm drawn and looked
very much ready to use it, should anyone they didn’t know approach them.

“Ready when you are, Spectre.” Riley looked down at the councilor. “You ready to move, Sir?”

“I’m ready to get off this damned ground, that’s for sure.” The trio started to move, Shepard and
Emerson helping Osoba stand as the man continued speaking. “And, if I remember correctly, we’re
headed to the south exit, opposite of what was stated on the comms, correct?”

“That’s affirmative, Councilor.” Shepard gave his arm a quick squeeze before releasing her grip
after helping him up. “Seems you were listening during the briefing after all. I was convinced you
were doing email.”

“Really, Spectre?” He gave a nod, indicating he was ready to move. “I was taking notes!” As they
started to move quickly toward the exit, Shepard took the point position; Osoba scowled at her back
as he saw blood dripping down across her armor. “Shepard, you’ve been injured!” The realization
of what had nearly happened to him almost caused him to stumble over his own feet. “Holy shit…
That’s why you crashed into me! You charged to intercept…” He hesitated only an instant before
blurting, “You took that shot for me! I’d probably be a dead man had you not done that!”

“Yes, Sir, you would.” Shepard answered without stopping and without looking back, keeping her
eyes forward as they continued to move, sweeping for threats and searching for the commando escort
that was supposed to be meeting them. “I also heard three additional shots, one of which sounded
muffled, as if it came from a silenced weapon of some kind… meaning at least two additional
shooters. So, the next time I ask you to wear a damned vest, you’ll know I’m not simply blowing
smoke up your ass… and you might actually do what I recommend.”
Riley cut in with, “Lieutenant Iremi’s team; sixty degrees right.”

Glancing in that direction, Shepard located the incoming team and altered the trio’s course to intercept them as she continued, “Thanks, Riley. Now that we have a full escort, let’s pick up the pace so my stepping in front of that bullet won’t have been in vain.”

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Corporal Owen Hamilton’s first indication the attack had begun was the sound of a plate full of food clattering off of a chair and falling to the ground, followed by gasps of shock from a small cluster of people about six or seven meters from the main stage. He nearly broke protocol by leaving his assigned position; staying with the admiral, he watched with a great deal of interest when he discovered Ambassador Reuben Trost on his knees, facial features swollen and distorted, hands clutching at his throat as his face rapidly turned purple.

He heard the call for emergency help in his comm-link; looking around quickly, he discovered Councilor Osoba – flanked on each side by Spectre Shepard and Staff Commander Riley Emerson – approaching from the rear of the parade grounds; Hackett’s movement towards the commotion drew his attention back to his assigned task.

Unclipping the M-11 from the hard point on his armor, the corporal trotted past Hackett as if to escort him away from all the commotion. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Shepard appear, seemingly out of thin air and wreathed in ethereal curtains of shifting blue waves, only to be jerked off the ground and tossed bodily into Councilor Osoba. Ignoring them as the sound of a high-powered rifle echoed in diminishing waves over the compound, Owen stopped in front of Hackett, whose piercing blue eyes skewered him in a questioning look.

Saying nothing to the Human race-traitor, Hamilton brought up his weapon without hesitation and pulled the trigger twice, placing a pair of heavy-alloy rounds in the center of the Shepard apologist’s chest. Hackett grunted from the impact of each shot. His expression changed from simple curiosity to a pain-filled grimace as a pair of dark red stains appeared and swiftly began spreading across the virgin blue surface of his dress jacket. Clutching his mortally-wounded chest, he staggered back a step, growling, “You bastard,” as he cast an angry look at his assassin, before silently crumpling to the ground as his legs collapsed.

Amid the shouts of anger and disbelief from behind him, he heard a voice he thought he recognized. Dammit! That sounded like Brooks! Owen turned to his right to see a dark-skinned woman running towards a different area within the chaos of people screaming and trampling each other to get away. Could that actually be her? She looks different than I remember. Shifting his eyes further into the crowd, he noticed the man that had accompanied the mystery woman moving purposefully towards him. Don’t know who in Hell that guy is, but I can’t let ‘im reach me! Hamilton absolutely knew he dare not risk being captured. Damned squids ‘ll get in my fuckin’ head and learn too much! Not waiting for the stranger to get any closer, he smoothly brought the M-11 up, placed the still-warm muzzle against the underside of his jaw and, with a grin directed at the fast approaching stranger, pulled the trigger.

Knowing it was too late to help Admiral Hackett, Tim slid to a stop, momentarily at a loss for what to do next; looking around, he saw Zoë leap onto the back of the cloaked assassin targeting Ambassador Hoffman. He spared another quick glance at the admiral, lying motionless in the grass… and the man that had murdered him, his forehead and top of his skull completely gone, then turned and sprinted towards where Zoë had been grappling with the cloaked assassin.

His heart dropped to his stomach when he realized that Zoë was also laying in the grass. Goddammit! No! He noticed a Marine moving towards the pair and saw Zoë move, however
slightly, causing him to gasp with relief. He spun about and waved down another passing Marine, pointing in the direction of the crowd surrounding Hoffman and yelling at him to send more med-techs with a hover-litter.
To Catch a Killer

Chapter Notes

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation
CO - Commanding Officer
FTL - Faster Than Light travel
Grá mo chroí - love of my heart (Gaelic)
QEC - Quantum Entanglement Communicator
Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)
SpecOps - Special Operations

Knight Shade, at Large – 28 Sep 2188

As the Spectre team made their way back to the docks with Councilor Osoba, Samantha Traynor was monitoring the Alliance Security band and had been calling out updates, so those aboard were already aware that Hackett and Trost had both died and that Trost’s Deputy, Malcolm Leiker, had been automatically elevated to the position of Prime Minister. Ambassador Hoffman had miraculously squeaked through uninjured, compliments of Zoë Lawrence and Atlas, so Jatok and Team 2 had made their rendezvous and were now headed toward the docks, their destination being the Council Shuttle.

The entire facility had been placed in secure lockdown within seconds of the shot that had nearly killed Councilor Osoba; none of the guests remaining inside the exclusion zone around the building would be going home until each and every person in attendance was vetted… one at a time and with extreme care and attention to detail.

“Jatok. Please let me know as soon as all of you are safely aboard.”

“Got it, T’Soni. Just entering the docking area now. Be there in under three.”

“Jiris is inbound, Liara.” Traynor glanced up from the display and noted an unusual tenseness in the Asari’s usually graceful form; the Shadow Broker was upset… angry, even. Haven’t seen that since… Hell! A really long time… Since the end of the damned Victory Tour. “The captain will be fine, Liara.”

Steely blue eyes darted over to meet hers, and Traynor felt a shiver run down her spine as the icy stare laced into her very soul. Liara noticed Samantha’s posture stiffen in response; quickly dropping her gaze to the deck, she drew in a deep, calming breath. Forcing herself to smile slightly softened her facial expression as she looked at the specialist again and said, “She will be… but I can tell she’s injured. Thank you, though, for the reassurance.”
At Liara’s words, Traynor’s eyebrows rose; she opened her comm relay and spoke hastily, “Dr Yandle. Report to the docking bay, please… Shepard’s coming in injured. Ambulatory, but details unknown.”

“You’re not letting anyone in while he treats the Captain,” as she waived her omnitool through the edges of the haptic interface; the translucent red immediately turned green and the door noiselessly slid open. As the Asari disappeared inside, the door slid closed behind her and the lock shifted quickly back to red, leaving the humbled Osoba staring at the door in bewilderment.

“Hey Blue.” Shepard winced as Derek withdrew another sliver of metal from the back of her head. She was sitting on the table in only her underwear; her armor and mesh having been hastily removed and piled to the side. She held her right hand out, steering Liara to her uninjured side. “I’m glad Aethyta thought to put our spare sets of armor aboard. My backplate shield generator and biocomputer are pretty screwed up… maybe beyond repair.”

“Your armor can be replaced, Siame… You cannot.” Her eyes narrowed in concern as she watched Derek extract a shiny sliver of golden metal from Shepard’s scalp.

Yandle held up the forceps so Liara could get a good look at the offending slip of alloy as he said, “She only took one shot, but that single casing held many, many of these… I have no idea of the total quantity, but the firing angle meant that the majority of its energy was directed downward. If this had hit Osoba, unarmored, these things would have shredded every damned organ in the man’s torso.”

“What, exactly, is Shepard’s condition?” Now that Liara had time to take in the view before her and realize that Samantha truly would be fine, her curiosity got the better of her. “And why have you not applied medigel, or anything to stop the bleeding on her arm?” Liara’s eyes met those of the doctor
as she explained, “I am not questioning your treatment choices, I am simply curious as to the reason.”

He smiled at the Asari and replied, “Because that arm is riddled with slivers just like the one I showed you. Any form of bandage would simply shove them in deeper… and medigel would seal them in, either option making extraction all that much more difficult.”

“Nice try at a distraction, Liara, but I can sense you’re blocking the link, which tells me you know something very bad has happened… something you don’t care to share with me just yet.” Shepard sighed, “I imagine Trost is dead… and I suspect poison, from the way he looked when we last saw him.” Her green eyes caught stormy blues, awash in extra liquid as she unblocked their link; the knowledge of Hackett’s murder roared through, hitting her siame like a charging Yahg. Reacting with an involuntarily jerk of her head, she howled in pain as the sudden movement buried the sharpened tips of Dr Yandle’s extraction tool in her scalp.

“God damn it! Hold your head still, Shepard!” Derek swore as he quickly glared at Liara. “I’d ask you to leave, Dr T’Soni, but you and your damned link aren’t cut off by simple physical separation. What in Hell was that all about?”

Shepard answered for Liara, her quiet voice filled with the agonizing pain of loss… over the senseless murder of the man who had led the Alliance through the worst conflict in the history of Humankind. “Steven Hackett is dead… Shot point blank by one of his own damned Marines.”

“Well, shit!” Derek’s hands fell away as he looked up to meet Liara’s eyes, full of tears that overflowed and streamed down her face. “Devastating news of that sort is kind of important to know. I’m sorry I yelled… but perhaps, if you ever again have to share similarly bad news, please… ask me to stop what I’m doing first so I don’t further aggravate Shepard’s injuries. I just impaled the back of her head with these forceps.” He let out a deep sigh and dropped the tool into the sterilization tray; picking up a fresh one, he resumed his work. “So… both Trost and Hackett are dead, with Hoffman and Osoba on their way to Palaven? What in Hell are we doing? Even if they come to an agreement on the Treaty, who’s left to approve it?”

Liara bruskly wiped away her tears and answered, “The Deputy, Malcolm Leiker, was automatically appointed as the interim Prime Minister upon confirmation of Reuben’s death. He has already contacted us with instructions to proceed, stating he refuses to let terrorists dictate Systems Alliance policy.”

“Damn straight.” Derek continued working, dropping the second pair of forceps into the tray and picking up a stitching wand. “That’s it for your head, Captain. Let’s get this closed up so I can start on your arm. Seeing as it’s the back of your arm and shoulder, I’ll have you lay face down on the table; it will be easier and faster that way.

Once Derek was done with the stitcher, Shepard slid off the table and reached out with her good hand, caressing Liara’s cheek in a futile attempt to wipe away the streaks left behind by the Asari’s tears. Liara could tell Samantha was furious and the dichotomy that was Shepard amazed her yet again; the Spectre was undeniably angry about what had happened yet, somehow, she still managed the tenderest of strokes across Liara’s cheek as she said, “We’ll avenge him, Liara.” Continuing to growl softly, she added, “I swear to you that every last one of the bastards having anything to do with this fucking conspiracy will be brought to justice… but, right now, I need a huge favor from you.”

Liara could sense that Sam was devastated, both in heart and soul, by the death of yet another adopted father figure. In spite of their differences and prior occasional conflicts, Shepard had still very much trusted and respected Admiral Hackett. To have him ripped away by someone who was supposed to be one of their own was the ultimate betrayal. As always, Liara would do whatever her
bondmate asked of her, if it would help ease her pain. “Anything, Siame.”

“I imagine today’s events are all over the news, but I don’t know how they’re spinning it, so I need you to get on the QEC and call my mother as soon as we drop out of FTL at the relay… which should be relatively soon.” Samantha sighed sadly. “I need Mom to know what really happened… that we’re okay, on our way to Palaven, and that we’ll be there soon so she can see us in person and know we’re not lying to her in an attempt to spare her any further anguish.”

Liara leaned forward and kissed Shepard very gently on the lips before carefully touching their foreheads together. “As you wish, Sam. Please join me on the Bridge when you’re done here… Not only will your mother be concerned; the crew needs to see that you are alright as well.”

“I’ll do that… As soon as I take a shower and get into my spare armor.” They separated, and Shepard smiled softly. “Thank you, and I’ll be up there as soon as I can, Grá mo chroí.”

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Alliance Military Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 28 Sep 2188

Groaning from the intense pain like a mortally wounded animal, Zoë was attempting to look around when a gentle hand cupped her cheek. “Ma’am?” A man’s voice, seemingly calm but authoritative, momentarily brought her back to the here and now. “Miss?” The voice was insistent, forcing Zoë to focus her attention on the concerned face hovering above her own. Blue eyes so pale they looked nearly white gazed down at her.

The Alliance sergeant that had been part of Hoffman’s escort detail kneeled beside her as a young woman, a Marine corporal that had probably been in the audience, carefully cut and peeled away the fabric of Zoë’s under-armor mesh between her left hipbone and the bottom of her ribcage. “Ma’am!” Using a loud voice, the sergeant said, “Stay with me, Ma’am! You cannot go to sleep just yet!” This last was said with a grim smile, as the corporal on the other side of Zoë’s prone body attempted to work some medigel into the long, bloody wound in her side.

Looking up and around, the young Marine asked in a loud voice, “Does anyone know who this woman is? Anyone!” Turning her eyes to the sergeant, she said softly, “She’s likely bleeding internally; extracting this knife would probably make things worse. Do you know who she is?”

Tim Stafford came trotting up to the group, followed closely by a quartet of base MPs; a pair of medtechs carrying a hover-litter were following several meters behind. Addressing the pair of Marines kneeling beside Zoë, Tim told the corporal, “Her name is Zoë Lawrence. How bad…”

The sergeant immediately looked back at Zoë, saying, “Hang in there, Ms Lawrence… we’re going to get you to the base hospital.” Setting the litter down beside her, the techs carefully placed the bleeding woman on the stretcher, activated its mini-mass effect generator and – followed by two of the four MPs – carried her away for treatment. The corporal that had helped Zoë laid a blood covered hand on Tim’s upper arm as he started to follow the litter bearing his friend. “Hold up there, Sir. As it appears you know Ms Lawrence, these MPs are going to need some information from you.” Splitting her attention between the sergeant and Tim, she said in a reassuring tone, “I will follow Ms Lawrence into the infirmary, make sure she gets priority treatment.”

The sergeant nodded to the corporal; after visually confirming that Hoffman, still accompanied by his second Marine guard, was moving towards the designated exit for evac, he returned his attention to Tim. Sticking out his hand, he said, “Sergeant Vassili Maddix, Sir. Do you work with… you said her name was Zoë?”
“That’s correct, Sergeant… Zoë Lawrence. Is she going to be alright?”

“Don’t know, Mr…?”

“Tim Stafford. Zoë is… a colleague.”

“Looked like she knew how to handle herself.” Maddix was interrupted by one of the two MPs crouching beside the would-be assassin; he asked Tim, “Excuse me for a moment?” After a nod from Stafford, Maddix turned to the MP, saying, “Corporal?”

The MP had finally found and disabled the cloaking generator, allowing the form of the would-be assassin, sprawled in the grass in the center aisle between chairs, to become visible. “You ever see this guy before, Sarge? He seemed Hell-bent on killing Ambassador Hoffman.”

The form that had emerged from the light-bending effects of the cloaking generator was a slim man, with the wiry build of a long-distance runner. There was a bit of blood matted in the hair at the back of his head, no doubt where Sergeant Maddix had blindly kicked him; moreover, his labored, exhaled groans of pain were accompanied be a whistling confirmation that his larynx had been partially crushed.

With the assassin’s cloaking shield disabled, Tim’s eyes had widened in recognition. Speaking softly into the near silence, he said, “Sergeant, I know that man.” Surprised, Maddix looked around at Tim as he continued, “Frédéric Klein… formerly employed by Cerberus as a skilled assassin… as a blade specialist.”

Maddix turned back to the MPs. “Not trying to tell you how to do your job, Sergeant, but it would probably be a good idea to look for another blade. I seriously doubt the knife he left stuck in Ms Lawrence was the only one in his possession. Once the doctors have dealt with his injuries, make sure he’s kept in a high-security area. Brass will want to know who sent ‘im.”

As the MP pulled the lanky man’s arms together behind his back and clamped a pair of binders on his wrists. Maddix turned back to Tim. “I’m not going to ask how you know this bastard’s identity, Mr Stafford. As for Ms Lawrence, this base has top-flight physicians. I’m sure your friend will receive the best of care. Now, if you will wait here, I believe these MPs will wish to have a word or two with you.”

Before Maddix could leave, Tim stepped up beside him and said, “Sergeant Maddix? I actually need you to relay some information for me.” In a quiet voice, Tim added, “Since I do not have my omnitool, I would appreciate it if you would contact Spectre Samantha Shepard for me.

“And why would I want to do that, Mr Stafford?”

“It appears that my escort…” he motioned to the MPs behind him, “… will not be allowing me to leave the premises. Spectre Shepard spoke with Zoë and me during the tour last week; she sanctioned our presence here for today’s dedication. Notwithstanding the able protection offered by you and your partner, Zoë Lawrence put her life on the line to keep Frédéric Klein from pushing 19 centimeters of stainless steel into the ambassador’s chest.” Tim paused; continuing with a grim smile, he added, “That knife he left in her side was meant to end Hoffman.”

“We have to accompany the ambassador back to Palaven, Mr Stafford, so I will personally deliver your message to the Spectre as soon as I see her there.”

“Thank you, Sergeant.” Tim watched as Maddix turned and began jogging towards the gate in order to catch up with Hoffman and the corporal. With a sigh, he turned towards the MPs standing silently
behind him.

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**Vancouver, B.C., Earth, At Large – 28 Sep 2188**

“NorthAm Bank. Disturbance on the southeast corner!”

Sharon heard the call from one of her agents stationed outside the perimeter. “Scanner picking anything up?”

“No, Ma’am… but passive detection has identified a moving void, headed south-by-southeast in a straight line. I’m running the glideslope now… I’ll have an approximate landing area in a sec.”

“You heard the man.” Sharon’s lips curled into a snarl. “Start moving to box the southeast quadrant… I want that asshole caught!” Even with the lack of responses, Sharon knew her teams were on the move. She could only wait and hope they didn’t arrive too late.

“Vancouver General!”

*Shit!* Sharon thought about the level of traffic in and around the major hospital on any given day. “Hustle it up, people! If he touches down and gets on public transportation, we may never find him again!”

A chuckle was present in the voice that came back. “No worries there, Colonel. I have active facial recognition tied into the system. That’s the best thing he could do for us, because I can track him the entire time until he departs the system.”

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**Ladner, B.C., Earth – 29 Sep 2188**

After taking extreme care while making his way from the hospital to the old, forgotten safehouse in eastern Ladner, the subject of Sharon Culver’s search slammed the outer sides of his tightly-clenched fists down on either side of the haptic interface before him. His efforts to bring his frustration under control were in vain; after making all the plans, doing all the work of getting himself and his massive weapon into an optimal firing position, taking the shot and making good on his escape, Douglas Walker realized that Saracino had reneged on paying his completion fee… because the man he had really wanted dead hadn’t died… hadn’t even been scratched.

The ‘shadow’ Walker thought he had glimpsed in his scope, just before releasing the weapon to deal with the security forces coming out of the offices, turned out to be bloody-fucking-savior-of-the-galaxy’s-aliens Spectre Shepard; somehow, the squid-fucker had managed to place her armored back in the path of Osoba’s bullet an instant before it arrived on target. Denied the now obvious necessity of a follow-on shot by the arrival of the armed security team, Walker had been forced to abandon his rifle and shooting position in order to deal with their interference, so he could take flight – literally. Wearing a customized wingsuit had allowed him to depart the building in a way very different from how he had so painstakingly arrived. *Should have stayed and killed them all… just because. Couldn’t have turned out much worse than this… and I’d still have at least some of my equipment!*

Although the continuously changing news releases held few details concerning the attempts… and two deaths… at the dedication, Walker knew one thing for certain; his customized M-98 was now just another piece of evidence, along with all the gear he had left behind in the storage compartment near the terrace. It was quite likely the weapon was now secure in some storage locker inside the
Alliance’s Vancouver headquarters building. Fortunately, there was nothing in or on the weapon that could tie it to him… nor on any of the other equipment and trash he had left behind… but replacing all the gear – particularly his massive rifle – would cost him dearly.

The only thing left for him to do at the moment was to shelter the creds he had been paid; he needed to scatter those funds among his rather numerous secure accounts. Logging into his job account as ‘Wintergreen, Damien’, he filed three transfer requests, each for fifteen percent of his payment, before converting another ten percent directly to credit chits. He would have converted more, but the safehouse only had so many blanks available, and denominations that were too large would draw unwanted attention that he could ill afford when he went to use them. After allowing a few days to pass, he would transfer the balance to his other accounts. Have to move those creds someplace else before the miserable bastard reverses the damned transfer… assuming the fucker isn’t already working to do just that! Shit! Of all the miserable bad luck, this tops everything!

Once again having credits in his pocket, Walker relaxed just a bit as he sat back and thought about what came next. His first stop had to be the Vancouver Landfill; the safehouse had an evacuation plan that held the access codes for a small personal transport, hidden somewhere amongst the carcasses of other craft that were worth nothing but the occasional part a salvager may need to locate for some out-of-production model. He snorted and spoke to the empty space around him. “It will just be a continuation of my shit luck that someone has already found it, bypassed the access security, and stolen the fucking thing.”

He stood and made his way to the door, reviewing the security screens for the external cameras before opening the door. Seeing nothing unusual, he shut off the lights, opened the door and stepped out into the night air – a comfortable twenty degrees Celsius – confident, as always, in his ultimate success. Nice night for a walk.

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As soon as Douglas opened the door and stepped outside, orders came from Colonel Culver. “He’s on the move. SpecOps-1… stay on the rotating tail. SpecOps-2… I want you silent and in and out of that house in less than five. Grab what you can without detection and get out. If all goes well, you’ll go back in for more once we apprehend Walker… but I don’t want you inside if he has some type of failsafe on his person. Do not reenter until you receive the all-clear. Is that understood?”

With positive responses from both teams, the operation to capture the elusive assassin began in earnest. Walker strolled along, seemingly headed nowhere in particular. Heading eastward, out of Ladner and into the open countryside, it was difficult for the team to rotate the person tailing and remain hidden. Frustrated, one agent whispered angrily into his comm unit, “What in Hell is out here? Where is he going?”

A member of SpecOps-2 responded smugly, “The landfill. He is expecting to find a ship there… We lucked out and found the damned ops manual in the house! It contains a general location and the access codes for a small transport… FTL capable.”

“You’re shitting me, right?” The SpecOps-1 lead cursed and questioned, “Colonel?”

“Don’t let him board that ship, Blaze.” Culver drew a deep breath, knowing this was it; success or failure would be theirs… likely within the next five or ten minutes. “But I need you to let him find it; it’s probably full of useful information which we can’t afford to lose if we don’t have to.”

“Understood, Commander.” A quiet, confident whisper came back and continued, “We’ll get it done, one way or another.”
They moved silently through the salvage portion of the yard, one team member or another in constant visual contact with their target, who was seemingly unaware of their existence. Blaze was starting to sweat, knowing the longer it took Walker to locate the ship, the greater their risk of someone on the team making an error that would tip off their presence, when Walker suddenly stopped and spun around at an unexpected noise.

A scrawny orange tabby raised its back and hissed at the intruder, causing Walker to chuckle at himself. “Stupid cat… you nearly made me piss myself.” He bent over and picked up a rock, throwing it hard and causing the cat to scamper off into the darkness. Walker’s eyes travelled past where the cat had just retreated, and he whistled quietly. “Well, I’ll be. Guess I owe you one, you mangy furball.” He smiled and walked eagerly toward his awaiting ship.

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Alliance Military Headquarters, Vancouver B.C. – 29 Sep 2188

“Ms Lawrence?” A man’s voice – gentle but insistent. “Ms Lawrence?” Zoë stirred slightly, attempting to shake off the fog in her mind. She tucked her chin down on her chest in a partially successful attempt to shield her eyes from the red-tinged brightness she could see through her tightly closed eyelids. After a moment, the light dimmed somewhat, prompting her to raise her head and slit one eye open. She squinted up at a shadowed face, which refused to come into focus.

“Ms Lawrence, I’m Doctor Noah Stegmann. Do you know where you are?”

Shit! If it’s a damned doctor, I must be in Hell, she thought, as she croaked out “Hospital?”

“Good guess. What gave it away, my impressive good looks or the open back gown you’re wearing?” When she didn’t respond, he continued, “Ms Lawrence, you were seriously injured yesterday during an altercation after the dedication ceremony. Do you remember what happened?”

Why the Hell is he asking me? “Cloaked assassin… Hoffman… target,” she croaked in response, prompting Doctor Stegmann to gently lift her head with a hand under her right cheek.

She felt the edge of a cup touch her lips as he said, “Here’s a couple of ice chips for you, Ms Lawrence. Unfortunately, I cannot give you anything to drink… not just yet, anyway. You said Hoffman was the target. The 19-centimeter blade we pulled out of your side probably belonged to the man you tackled… it did some pretty significant damage to your kidney and stomach, not to mention the slices in your oblique muscles. I stitched them all back together after repairing your stomach wall, but your kidney was severely damaged by the blade… too severely to be repaired. I’m sorry.”

Why the fuck was he sorry? It wasn’t his goddamned kidney, was it? “Assassin? Dead?”

A wry chuckle, then, “Unfortunately for him, he’s still alive… very much so, but it wasn’t for lack of you trying to crush his windpipe. As is, he’s being treated for a severely fractured larynx, along with a moderately severe concussion. Seems a Marine Sergeant kicked him in the head in order to get him off you… probably the only reason you didn’t succeed in crushing his windpipe… and, quite possibly the only reason you’re still alive, Ms Lawrence.”

“Hoffman? The others?”

“I can only generalize, Ma’am. There were fatalities, yes, but I’m not at liberty to divulge their identities… not yet, anyway.”

The doctor’s tone told her all she needed to know. Zoë closed her eyes. She had failed… Atlas had
failed. Tears began leaking from her tightly closed eyes as she felt her heart clench. There was another… “Osoba? What about Osoba?” she groaned. Doctor Stegmann started to dab at Zoë’s tears with a tissue, causing her to turn her head away in surprise. *Oh gods… I am surely in Hell. All the pain… all the deaths I have caused… are finally coming home to bite me in the ass!* She repeated, “Osoba?”

Stegmann placed his mouth next to Zoë’s ear and whispered, “Sniper targeted him… Spectre Shepard managed to save him by placing herself in the way. Bullet hit her in the back, threw her into him; she took the councilor down with her as she fell.”

“Shepard… fell? As in… dead?” Zoë’s eyes continued to leak moisture. *All I’ve done to protect her the last year… for nothing? Damn it all to Hell!* She repeated, “Osoba?”

She was greatly relieved when Stegmann answered, “No… Shepard literally fell, blasted over by a high-power anti-personnel round… but, seeing as she was in full armor, she is very much alive, as is Osoba.”

“Maybe God exists, after all.” Zoë brought up a hand, both to cover her eyes and massage her temples. “I have friends out there… can they visit me? I really need to speak with them…”

An unseen woman spoke up. “Sorry, Ms Lawrence, that’s not going to happen just yet.”

Zoë’s unhappiness with her perceived failure, combined with not knowing how her team had fared, made her reply sharper than intended. “Who the fuck are you, and why in Hell not?”

“Whoa… stow the attitude, lady, please? I’m in your corner. Name’s Medina… Corporal Gracelyn Medina, Alliance Marines. I tried to slow your blood loss out on the parade grounds, Ma’am. My CO assigned me to stay with you until you’ve healed sufficiently to be moved to the secure recovery wing, while we investigate the assassination plot against Admiral Hackett, Dominic Osoba, Arthur Hoffman and Reuben Trost.”

Zoë uncovered her eyes and squinted up at the Marine; noting the concern in the young woman’s eyes, she swallowed hard and attempted to soften her tone. “My apologies, Corporal. I remember you trying to keep me from bleeding to death on the parade grounds, and you have my gratitude for that, believe me.” After a pause, she continued, “Does the Alliance think I used a straight blade to carve my own kidney out for the fun of it?”

“My apologies, Ms Lawrence, I didn’t mean for you to get that impression from me… You are most definitely not a suspect in what is now being referred to as a conspiracy. Hell, I saw you tackle that cloaked bastard before he could reach the Ambassador. As far as I’m concerned, you went above and beyond what most civilians would be willing to do.” Medina huffed as she added, “We’ve suffered a serious breach in our security, Ma’am. You and your friends will be guests of the Systems Alliance Marines until things settle down a bit. We’ll be interviewing everyone we’ve detained in order to discover what went wrong with our security, and to determine who is responsible for the attack.” She chuckled slightly, adding, “By the way, it’s probably not a good idea to tackle a cloaked individual… at least, not unless you’re sure they don’t have a knife up their sleeve.”

“What about that bastard, Corporal? You have him, don’t you?”

Medina huffed again. “We do. He wasn’t breathing so well… doctors had to repair his larynx. He’s cuffed to a secure bed with a full-time guard monitoring him. Hasn’t said who he is or who he’s working for, but we’ll get to the truth about him, never fear.”

“You said my friends were being detained?”
“I did. Their credentials were forgeries… they weren’t even close to matching the real owners’ bioscans or records… so, we detained them in order to discover why… initially, they’ll probably be charged with trespassing and possessing falsified documents… with ‘other’ charges pending, depending on what our investigation uncovers.” She closed her eyes for a moment before adding, reluctantly… or so it seemed to Zoë. “We discovered that your credentials are forged as well, Ma’am. Is Zoë Lawrence really your name?”

Zoë attempted to smile, but the sharp, aching pain in her left side transformed it into a grimace. “That truly is my name, Corporal,” she sighed. “Do you know how long I’m going to be in here?” Medina looked at the doctor, standing on the other side of the med bed.

Doctor Stegmann shrugged as he replied. “You’ll be leaving intensive care tomorrow morning, but I’ll repeat what I just said… you suffered a pretty traumatic injury, Ma’am, so we’ll keep you in the hospital for at least ten to fourteen days in order to monitor your recovery. There’s also the matter of a replacement kidney for you. It’s standard procedure to sample your damaged organ and grow a replacement for implantation; since you were injured in a successful effort to prevent an assassination on Alliance property…” here he paused to glance at Corporal Medina, “… despite being here with forged credentials, we are still obligated to make you whole again.”

Medina said in an earnest tone, “She really needs to be in a secure area, Doctor.”

Doctor Stegmann replied in a calm voice. “Where the Hell do you think she’s going to go, Corporal? I guarantee the pain she would feel if she attempted to stand up and walk out of here would put her on the floor before she could take two steps.”

The corporal was silent for several moments before offering, “I don’t honestly believe she’d attempt any such thing… I simply want to ensure everything is done by the book, Doctor Stegmann. Along with the rest of her compatriots, Ms Lawrence here… and that freaking assassin… are the only people we have detained for cause. The damned sharpshooter is in the wind, and Corporal Hamilton used his M-11 to blow the top of his skull off, so we need to ensure this woman is protected from possible retribution by whomever ordered simultaneous hits on our four VIPs.” She used the fingers and thumb of one hand to massage her temples before continuing softly, as if to herself, “Yesterday was totally, completely fucked.”

“Okay. Just so we’re clear, Ms Lawrence is the one that came in here with an assassin’s blade sticking out of her side. This woman is my patient, Corporal. As long as she’s under my care, I will do all in my power to keep her from further harm, meaning she will remain in this hospital until I feel she can be safely released, understood?

“I’m sorry, Dr Stegmann… I wasn’t implying Ms Lawrence should receive anything but the best of care from us; I want to insure she remains safe as well. It’s just there are people on this base… military people… that share the ‘Humans first at any cost’ philosophy of Terra Firma and Earth-First. She would be quite vulnerable to an attack in the general recovery ward.”

Having heard all this, Zoë clamped down on her emotions. *I’m not going to waste any further energy mourning the people that died. I thought Cerberus would be hunting me after I killed Jack Harper… apparently, there are a few outliers in this facility that could be aware of my former identity. Just have to plan how to get my ass out of here and out of harm’s way.*

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Tim Stafford submitted to the whole-body omnitool scan with as much patience as he could muster; along with Rich, Boris and Émiléda and Melina Cousineau, he had been detained by the Marine guards after Zoë had been moved to the base hospital on a hover-litter. As the three men had
employed forged invitations and credentials in order to attend, and the Cousineau sisters had been vetted and hired after furnishing forged citizenship credentials, the officer in charge of base security had ordered all of them detained until their stories could be verified.

They had been separated for processing – this included having to completely strip down under the watchful eyes of a Marine guard, undergoing an omnitool scan of their bodies, having all their clothes confiscated for inspection, and being issued standard, bright orange prison scrubs. Once they had gone through the humiliation of being treated like the common criminals they were assumed to be, each of them had been locked in solitary three-by-three-meter cells to await questioning. After learning that retired Admiral Steven Hackett had died from his wounds, and that Reuben Trost had been asphyxiated after ingesting a deadly allergen, Tim was surprised they had only been charged with trespass and possessing forged docs.

Tim had the unfortunate luck to be chosen for an interview by a Marine sergeant named Diane Häberli. Sitting down across from the sergeant – obviously a career soldier, if the hash marks on her sleeve were a valid indication – Stafford could detect no sympathy in her demeanor or expression as she started asking questions, beginning with how long Tim had been a member of Cerberus. Stafford knew full well he was not required to answer any of the questions directed at him – he didn’t even have to acknowledge his name. He had also refused to answer Häberli’s questions regarding his association with Zoë Lawrence. Apparently, Häberli expected Tim to simply roll over out of fear and answer any question put to him; that he remained stubbornly silent wasn’t something Häberli had been trained to deal with.

After having been escorted back to his cell by an obviously hostile Sergeant Häberli, Tim looked around the bare interior and sighed. Sitting on the rock-hard bunk, he leaned back, rubbed his wrists where the restraints had been placed and thought about how badly yesterday and today had gone. He was worried sick about Zoë, having heard nothing since the med techs had hauled her away on a hover-litter the previous day. It appeared they were going to hold her and the rest of the team members incommunicado until they were interviewed by the Alliance. He thought briefly about Häberli, wondering if the overtly hostile woman was merely upset about yesterday’s events, or if she was a true adherent to the ideals espoused by LEAP or Terra Firma.

Didn’t seem as if she was upset that the Prime Minister and his military advisor had both died within minutes of each other, came the thought. Is she a former member of Cerberus… or LEAP… that eluded our net? Mentally shelving the question until he was once again able to use Atlas resources, he stretched out on the hard metal of the bench to gradually retreat into sleep.
Hot on the Trail

Chapter Notes

*Anam Cara* - Soul Friend/Mate (Gaelic)

CGC - Center for Galactic Cooperation

*Grá mo chroí* - love of my heart (Gaelic)

LEAP - League of Earth Alliance Patriots

QEC - Quantum Entanglement Communicator

*Siame* - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Palaven, Trebia, At Large – 29 Sep 2188

“Spectre?” Sergeant Maddix had finally located the target of his quest. “Spectre Shepard?”

She turned to face the man coming quickly towards her – an Alliance Marine – and her hand instantly dropped to the butt of her service pistol. Behind her, Captain Livos Tanni and Sella Temi readied their biotics in the event the Human proved to be a threat. Maddix, eyes opening wide in surprise, halted in his tracks and raised both hands in front of him, obviously empty. “Easy, Spectre… though I can’t say I fault you for being overly cautious. I imagine that fucking Corporal has us all questioning the Marines standing at our side.”

“What do you want, Sergeant?” Shepard’s voice was cold, and her hand never moved from her pistol as she asked the question.

“Maddix, Ma’am. Sergeant Vassili Maddix. I promised a man I would find you, and I keep my promises… and my oaths, Spectre.” Maddix glanced downward as he continued, “So, I’d feel a lot more comfortable if your knuckles weren’t turning white from your hold on that grip.”

“Speak your peace, Maddix.” Shepard relaxed the wrap of her fingers, but the heel of her hand remained where it was. “My patience… and trust… are a bit thin today.”

“Understood, Spectre.” Maddix went on to explain the actions of Zoë Lawrence and how a man by the name of Tim Stafford had requested he contact the Spectre. “Says you knew he and his group were gonna be there… and that you sanctioned their presence under false identification.”

Shepard let out a quiet chuckle and shook her head, immediately explaining, “It’s alright, Sergeant. Truthfully, I was aware she and Stafford were going to be there… though, the word *sanctioned* might be a bit strong for what actually happened. It’s more like I decided to give them an opportunity to help… by not tossing them out or having them arrested when I saw them during the pre-dedication tour.” She shrugged and, as an afterthought, added, “Also, it’s not Stafford’s group; their leader is Zoë Lawrence, the woman who stopped the assassin.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell us they were gonna be there, Shepard?” Maddix growled, “Would
have made things a Hell of a lot easier if we’d known who they were.”

The look on Shepard’s face cut off any additional complaints. The Spectre grit her teeth and answered, “Because of people like Corporal Hamilton. I had a damned list of over fifty Alliance Marines, Sergeant, all in and around that facility. My team tried like Hell to vet them all before the ceremony, but it’s not something that can be completed in only a few weeks, so how in Hell was I supposed to know who I could trust with information regarding additional plain-clothes agents I may have had in place?”

“Well… shit. Fifty?” Maddix dropped his hands to his sides. “You have me there, Spectre.”

“So, what did Stafford want? To make sure I knew that Lawrence saved Hoffman… when the Marines failed in their mission?”

“God damn, Spectre.” The Marine’s face turned red as he continued, “Don’t pull your punches, do you?” Without waiting for an answer, he added, “He has no omnitool, so no way to contact his friends on the outside. I think he wanted you to know because he’s hoping you will vouch for him and get them released under Spectre authority. I received an update from one of my troops, Corporal Medina. Seems she’s been assigned as the full-time guard for Ms Lawrence while the woman is recovering from surgery in the secure medical wing... the dagger Klein left in her side severely damaged her left kidney; wasn’t worth saving. There were four others in addition to Lawrence and Stafford; all are being held in isolation cells until we confirm their stories and have a positive identification.”

Liara stepped up to Shepard’s side and entered the conversation. “Have the Corporal get a list of names from both Stafford and Lawrence… from each independently, if possible… and forward them to the Knight Shade. We’ll compare the information to what we have in our own databases and confirm there are no unauthorized people who may have discovered our team’s presence… who may be attempting to leverage that knowledge to slip the net.”

Shepard nodded in agreement and added, “Include Corporal Medina’s contact information and we’ll let her know as soon as we complete the validation. We’ll send both of you a copy of our final list… and make sure everyone understands they are to release no one they have detained unless their name appears on that list… especially Frédéric Klein. He is beyond dangerous… and, honestly, I’d rather have him dead than not, but I need to speak with him before that happens. They are to lock him down tight and erase the entry code from the database… and I want a gag order; make sure no one even talks to that man. Spectre authority.”

“Understood, Ma’am.” Maddix raised an eyebrow. “And Stafford?”

“Can be released as soon as we have those lists from both him and Lawrence. Not before.” Shepard huffed in aggravation, but finally eased her hand off the butt of her service pistol. “And pass on that I don’t want either him or Lawrence leaving Vancouver before I get back there. If they try, throw their asses right back into a cell.”

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While Livos accompanied Liara back to the Knight Shade, so the Shadow Broker could explain, in person, what they needed from Riana regarding the lists, Shepard resumed pacing the halls of the Palaven Headquarters building, Huntress Temi at her side. With Hackett’s murder, a long-simmering resentment had rapidly grown to a full boil within the Spectre; the worst part about it was that Shepard had felt no hesitation in allowing the transition. She simply couldn’t wrap her mind around what had happened – that fellow Humans could actually be so ignorant as to believe the deaths of a few key leaders could change the destiny of Earth’s role in shared galactic management. She huffed
in disgust as she thought about the extremists’ ultimate goal. *How in Hell can they honestly think killing Trost and Hackett... and attempting to kill the other two as well... can somehow make it possible for Earth to become the Council’s sole ruling member, instead of an equal partner with the other races? All they accomplished with the attack... with the murders... was to validate the other races’ beliefs that Humans truly are uncivilized barbarians... no better than Batarian slavers!*

The trade negotiations were proceeding pretty much as expected; the main precepts had already been decided upon but, as the rather antiquated maxim stated, the devil was in the details. As such, the Spectre saw no rapid signing of the trade agreement anywhere on the horizon and wondered just how long it would be before the *Knight Shade* could return to duty. Having to sit around and wait on the politicians to finalize the treaty, with the constantly streaming news updates as heart-wrenching reminders of the previous Prime Minister’s – and Admiral Hackett’s – death, was almost too much to bear. She clenched her fists in frustration, barely suppressing her nearly overwhelming desire to simply scream in anger.

Caught up in her own thoughts, the Spectre failed to detect the approach of a woman she had been dodging all day; given who it was, even Sella didn’t think to warn her until it was too late.

“Samantha Shepard! I will not be ignored any longer!” The commanding voice of Admiral Hannah Shepard unceremoniously yanked the Spectre from her brooding and she almost snapped to attention before catching herself, but still abruptly spun around on her heel to face her mother.

“Sorry, Mom.” A troubled, younger Shepard ran a hand through what remained of her hair in frustration. “I’m not doing it on purpose. I just have a lot on my mind.”

Hannah approached quickly and spoke quietly. “I can tell, Sam... something is obviously bothering you and, I assume, a large portion of it includes Steven’s death. Talk to me.”

“Not here; there’s too much to talk about.” Sam’s face took on the barest hint of pink as she added, “Someplace private. How about the *Knight Shade*... over a late dinner?”

“You have a deal.” Hannah gave her a look that made Samantha realize there would be no more dodging. “I’ll be aboard no later than thirty minutes after tonight’s session closes out.”

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All of the news media had been broadcasting non-stop coverage of the protests resulting from the assassinations, especially the pro-Earth leadership rallies because they attracted huge crowds and often resulted in shockingly violent... and destructive... riots, with even more amazing ratings for the news outlets willing to risk the lives of the reporters covering them. The absolute... *conceit*... within such groups – that they could honestly believe Humans were capable of ruling the entirety of Citadel space – was dumbfounding to Shepard. Beyond that, what irked her the most was that it had her questioning her own loyalty to the Human race.

*Does my desire to cede even partial control of Earth’s galactic role to the Council mean I’m a traitor, as some say? Does moving to Thessia make me less of a patriot?* She knew such doubts were ridiculous, but she couldn’t keep herself from thinking them as she rehearsed recent events.

Throughout the morning, she and Liara had discussed her feelings in depth, during their agonizingly large amount of free time while the negotiators were in session. Together, they had determined their path forward; one which was, undeniably, likely to be extremely unpopular in certain circles. They had then retreated to the *Knight Shade’s* QEC chamber to place a secure call to Tevos; they discussed their idea and their proposal was received rather enthusiastically, and the process begun. Now, only one major obstacle remained... and as the time loomed closer, Samantha still had no idea how she was going to explain their decision to her mother. Worse yet, the Spectre was out of time;
her omnitool chimed… and she had no option remaining but to open the hatch and let her mother aboard.

Liara’s thoughts slipped easily into the back of her mind and Shepard drew a deep calming breath, letting the words soothe her angst. *I love you, Sam… and I understand how you feel. I experienced the same feelings of… betrayal… when I first learned of my mother’s work with Saren. Though, I do realize that there is a huge difference between her indoctrination and LEAP’s despotism… But, no matter what you decide, nothing between us will change. You are, and always will be, my Siame, my bondmate, my… Anam Cara. Would you like me to join you for dinner with your mother?*

Shepard couldn’t stop the swell of warmth that infused her being – nor did she want to – and it made her smile. No matter how disturbed her thoughts were over everything that had happened the day before, her mental state shifted with Liara’s thoughts and the ‘voice’ of her response was filled with laughter. *[Thanks, Grá mo chroí. You know how much I love to hear you use Gaelic… But, no. I need to talk to Mom on my own. No worries, I’ll get through this.]*

“…”

“I can’t help how I feel, Mom!” Samantha was angrily pacing the lounge, and it took every ounce of self-control she possessed to not yell at her mother. “I don’t care who actually pulled the trigger on this particular incident; the truth of the matter is all over the news… There are thousands of people coming out in support of this conspiracy… including their acts of murder! How can you possibly think that’s okay?”

“Samantha! That’s quite enough!” Shocked, Hannah stood quickly; had it not been fastened to the deck, her chair would have tipped over from her abrupt action. “You know better than that. I would never condone such behavior… but neither will I give up on the other billions of Humans who are condemning them and their attacks.” Sighing in frustration, she simply walked over to her daughter and halted the distraught woman in her tracks by wrapping loving arms tightly around her. Tears came to her eyes as she whispered, “I’ll miss him too, Sam. Steven was a good man… who has always been there for us through the toughest of times. We just have to trust that reasonable new leaders will step up and fill the void his death leaves in its wake.”

Samantha pushed away slowly and moved to stand in front of a large, open viewport. Staring up at the stars, she spoke quietly, “Just don’t expect that leader to be me. Not anymore.”

“No, Mom. I’m not going to change my mind.” She turned back and met her mother’s eyes. “It doesn’t seem like it was that long ago when I was sure I was Alliance for life… until I quite literally gave my life to the cause, only to be doubted and ridiculed when I miraculously returned.” A gentle smile came to her face as comforting sensations slipped through the link from her bondmate. “Only Liara fought to bring me back.” The smile faded quickly as she continued, “Nearly everyone else gave up on me, with most hardly even giving my death a second thought… simply moving on with their lives, completely ignoring the threat I was trying to bring to light when I was killed.”

“And I have never been so happy to find out that you were back with us, Sam.” Tears streamed down Hannah’s face. “All of us who know and love you were ecstatic!”

“A few… yes… but not all. Hell, the Alliance didn’t even care enough to bother collecting the bodies from Alchera. My dead crew stayed in those frozen wastes for over two years… until I returned there aboard the SR2 to take care of their remains.” Samantha sighed tiredly. “Since then, I have been personally assaulted for my beliefs, Humans have repeatedly tried to kill either me or Liara because of our relationship… failing in that, they have made repeated attempts to defame my
character… arrest me, have me beaten… The attacks go on and on.”

“That’s a vocal minority, Sam.” Hannah was running out of arguments and she knew it, so fell silent when she saw the expression on her daughter’s face shift. She knew, right then, it was a debate she couldn’t possibly win.

Samantha shrugged apathetically and continued, “So, where are all the supporters you speak of? Where are all the people who you insist supposedly love me so? Why are they not stepping up to help defend my honor? My career? My life? The only ones in evidence were you, Aunt Karin, Aunt Kay… and Admiral Hackett. I’m simply tired of the constant fight to justify my beliefs, Mom. Let people think what they will, because I’m ready for real, honest peace… not in the galaxy… but in my soul.”

Hannah sighed, “And we simply aren’t enough for you, are we?” It was more a statement than a question.

“That’s not it, Mom, and you know it.” Samantha stepped forward and took her mother’s hands. “You, Karin and Kay; you three have been my bedrock; the only constants through my entire life… and you know that I love each and every one of you with all that I am. You’ll never lose that, I swear.”

“But you’re going anyway.” Her voice was brighter, and Hannah started to smile as she said the words, realizing she simply had to let go and trust the bonds between mother and daughter would transcend all else.

“Yes, I am.” A great weight lifted off Samantha’s heart at seeing her mother smile and she actually chuckled. “You always wanted a big family… Well, my Asari family is pretty darned big… huge, as you know; you’ve met them. You’ve witnessed, firsthand, how easily they accepted me and our traditions into their lives without reservation.” Thinking of all her Asari friends caused a brief, affectionate smile to flash across her lips before she continued, “This really is what I want, Mom… I’ve already spoken with Councilor Tevos and I have her sponsorship. At the conclusion of these negotiations, I intend to relinquish my ties to Earth in favor of full Asari citizenship… continuing my employment by the Council as an Asari Spectre.”

“I suppose that’s it, then. At least I know why you’ve been so distracted and heavy-hearted… I just knew it had to be more than Steven’s death.” Hannah made her way to one of the chairs in front of the viewport and plopped herself down in one. “I only have one remaining question… How in the galaxy are you going to break this to Karin and Kay? You can’t honestly think either one will ever forgive you if they hear it through a news agency!”

Samantha stared at her for a moment before answering, “I hadn’t really given it any thought… I was too worried about telling you!”

“You’d better figure it out, kiddo.” Hannah chuckled quietly, and her eyes glinted mischievously. “These negotiations aren’t going to last forever. Perhaps you need to talk to Councilor Tevos again and postpone your announcement?”

“I can call Aunt Kay easy enough…” Shepard shook her head and continued, “But Aunt Karin? The Normandy is comm out. The only authorized communications are emergency comms that are direct from the Council.”

“Well, then.” Hannah stood and grabbed her daughter’s shoulders, turning her toward the ladder leading down to the Knight Shade’s secure communications room. “It seems the perhaps just turned into a resounding yes. You definitely need to ask Tevos if she can pass the news.”
Groaning, Samantha walked wearily toward the ladder. “I imagine Councilor Tevos and Karin are going to be easy, relatively speaking… but Ashley? Once she hears the news, she’s likely to be the next one to try to kill me!”

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Ladner, British Columbia, Earth – 29 Sep 2188

“Target has located the transport. Orders?” Lieutenant Courtney Bewick kept her sniper rifle sights on the man, sure the order to take the shot would be coming.

Blaze quickly asked, “Cliff… you in position?”

“Roger that, Cap.”

“Fire.”

Walker heard the triple shots… a telltale of the M-29 Incisor… and yelped as he dove off to the side, scurrying to gain cover at the base of the steps leading to the hatch of his ship. Goddammit! Not now! Not when I’m so fucking close to getting off this stupid rock!

He immediately hunkered down beneath the steps and typed the command code into his omnitool, transmitting it to the ship and sighing in relief when he heard the hatch slide open above him. Looking at the blood streaming down his leg from the single wound in the back of his thigh, he grinned. Bastards want me alive or that would have been a kill shot… either that or the shooter is fucking incompetent. Wouldn’t surprise me. Either way, that plays to my favor… unlikely to shoot me in the back!

Since none of them were far behind, the entire squad of six had converged on the coordinates provided as Blaze’s voice once again came over the comms. “Cliff… I’ll assume you immediately tagged that ship. Ringer… Did you get a chance to dart him?”

“Not yet, Captain… If I had, he’d already be sleeping. But, I’ve got a bead on the entry hatchway so, if he’s stupid enough to make a break for it, I’ll tag him, and he’ll be down in five.” Specialist Monte Mehringer chuckled as he added, “five seconds, that is. This new dart Tisha designed has one Hell of a kick.”

“Do I want to know how you know that?” They could all hear the grin in Blaze’s voice as he asked, knowing Ringer had very likely shot some poor sap… a convenient drug dealer or such… to test the new dart’s effectiveness.

“No, Sir.” The medic, Letisha ‘Tish’ Wagg wasn’t laughing, but her tone was light. “Though, Walker’s a big dude… might take a little bit longer, but I still give him less than 60 seconds before he hits the deck.”

“So, not enough time to launch that ship from a cold start, that’s for sure.” Blaze breathed a little sigh of relief, but still wouldn’t rest until they actually had the bastard in custody.

“Nope.” Tish answered with a grin. “Especially if I shock the shit out of him at the same time… He’ll go down immediately and give the dart an extra five to take effect; the combo just might put him down for the count. Plenty of time for Cliff and Ringer to shut him down and for all of us to get onto that damned ship.”

“Ooooh. I like that. Flying her out would give me lots of time to dig out all her secrets.” Engineer Rudolf ‘Fortune’ Fortunato chimed in for the first time. “No need to rush things.”
It was then that Walker took the gamble and made his last-ditch effort to lunge for the steps. Tish pointed her omnitool and triggered the neural shock just as the would-be assassin yelped at the sting in his right butt cheek. He began to reach for the dart, only to feel his muscles spasm as they seemed to disconnect from his nervous system. Son of a fucking blue whore… He managed only a disconcerted grunt as his world turned gray, his legs collapsing beneath him. Banging his chin hard on the metal steps as he crumpled into a heap at the bottom, his graying world turned to black as he succumbed to unconsciousness.

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**Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large - 30 Sep 2188**

Communications Specialist Sheldon Dubow was finishing up his daily duty report when a seldom activated flashing light, accompanied by a soft, repeating chime vied for his attention. Waving his hand through the flashing light – in reality, just another portion of the large haptic interface assigned to his scrutiny – he silenced the chime while allowing the flashing light to continue. With a sigh of regret – and amazement – at having to disturb the rest of both Spectre Williams and Doctor Karin Chakwas, he moved to his left to interact with the ship’s intercom; first keying in the code for Williams’ quarters on Deck One, he sent a request and waited. He had an audio acknowledgement in less than a minute. “What do you need, Specialist?”

“Begging your pardon, Ma’am, but there’s a QEC call for you from the CGC. It’s Councilor Tevos, Ma’am… and it’s marked urgent.”

“Send an acknowledgement, Specialist. I’ll be right down.”

After repeating the process with Doctor Chakwas, Dubow stepped away from his station at the tactical display projector well and mounted the steps to the raised walkway surrounding the war room; entering the QEC chamber, he quickly entered his ident-code, waited for the system to respond, then acknowledged the request. As the QEC came online, the projector rendered a lifelike image centered within the circular chamber. Dubow recognized Councilor Tevos, who stood patiently waiting for the ship’s captain and doctor to arrive.

Concerned over the unusual request, Karin arrived less than a minute after being called by Dubow; stepping up to the rail, she keyed in her ID and said, “Councilor Tevos. Forgive my impatience, but I do not believe you have ever contacted me directly. Given the oddity of such a summons, I cannot keep myself from worrying over the well-being of Spectre Shepard. Please, tell me she is okay.”

Tevos smiled at the doctor as she answered, “Shepard is fine, Doctor, but there has been an incident at the Alliance Vancouver headquarters. I prefer to wait until Spectre Williams is also present, so I do not have to repeat myself.”

“Goddess, yes. It’s my pleasure. I understand your concerns completely, Doctor.” Even under the circumstances, Tevos had to laugh. “She has given us frequent cause for concern, has she not?”

Their casual banter fell to silence as Spectre Williams entered the room. Surprised to see Karin, the first words out of Ashley’s mouth were basically the same, and much more to the point. “Has something happened to Shepard or Liara?”
“They are both fine, but…” Tevos fell silent for only a moment before dropping her eyes. After the short, uncomfortable pause, she returned her gaze to Williams and replied, “… there was a tragic incident at the Alliance Vancouver headquarters dedication, Ms Williams.”

Thinking, Oh God! What has happened now? It’s only been a year… she replied in as calm a voice as she could manage, “What happened, Councilor?”

Tevos clasped her hands together in front of her chest. “Just after the completion of the dedication ceremony, a coordinated attack was carried out against all four of the special envoys in attendance.” With a sigh conveying only a portion of the infinite sadness she was feeling, she continued, “It pains me to have to pass on this news, but Prime Minister Reuben Trost was poisoned, seemingly through something introduced into the salad that was being served for the luncheon. The call for assistance for his violent allergic reaction was apparently the prompt for the rest of the attacks to begin. A long-range sharpshooter fired a shot at Councilor Dominic Osoba, which was blocked, fortunately; Spectre Shepard threw herself in the path of the bullet.”

Karin, remembering the armor-piercing round that had nearly ended Liara T’Soni’s life the previous year at the same location, interrupted Tevos to say, “And you say she’s fine?”

The councilor looked down for a moment before replying, “Yes, she is; the bullet was meant for an unarmored person, so the impact simply drove Shepard into the councilor, causing them both to stumble and fall… during which she fell on top of him. Her injuries were relatively minor and he was uninjured, other than bumps and bruises.” Karin nodded her understanding as Tevos continued. “A cloaked assassin identified as Frédéric Klein, formerly employed by Cerberus, attempted to kill the Human Ambassador to Palaven, Arthur Hoffman. The assassin was tackled by a young woman from the audience, who was herself critically injured; after saving the ambassador’s life, she was taken to the medical center in the building, and I’ve had no further news as to her fate. Klein was captured and is now being held for attempted murder.”

Ashley had been carefully watching the councilor’s body language and could see she wasn’t done. “There’s more, isn’t there, Madam Councilor?”

Tevos brought her hands up to her face, the bad news she was about to deliver nearly overwhelming her usual calm. Finally, she pulled her hands down and spoke. “This last is the worst possible news I have for you.” She gasped a sob before quickly subduing it. “Military Secretary to the Prime Minister… Former Fleet Admiral…” she shuddered as she tried to continue.

Karin let out a gasp, saying “My God, Councilor. Not Admiral Hackett! Is he injured… or… dead?”

“He took his own life rather than be taken into custody, Spectre.” With only a brief pause, she continued, “Only Humans were targeted, Ms Williams. There were several Turians in the audience… and a few Asari. The only people targeted in this conspiracy were Humans.”

“Son of a bitch.” Ashley closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, blowing it out slowly before asking, “Do you know when they’ll be holding the Admiral’s funeral?”
“I have not been informed about the location or date.” Tevos looked down for several moments and wiped the tears from her eyes before she concluded, “Under the circumstances, I expect that only the commanders of whatever headquarters is selected for the funeral, along with the troops assigned there, will be able to attend. Unfortunately, the Normandy will need to remain in the Phoenix Massing in order to monitor the Quarian situation, Ms Williams. If I am provided updates on the Alliance investigation, I will pass them along.”

With Ashley remaining silent as she attempted to process the news, Karin nodded. “Thank you for sharing this with us, Councilor. I know it wasn’t an easy call to make.”

Tevos said, “There’s more.”

Karin could not fathom how there could be any worse news than what she’d just been told, so waited silently for the councilor to continue.

“Spectre Shepard has contacted me with a rather… unusual request; one which I intend to approve. However, she also requested that I inform both of you first, so you do not learn about it through the news services in the event her very personal decision leaks and goes public.” In a voice that managed to convey equal amounts of sadness and amazement, she said, “Samantha has asked me to begin the process that will grant her full Asari citizenship.”

Karin started to point out, “Dual citizenship is not permitted by…” when the ramifications of Sam’s request suddenly sent her mind reeling. “Wait… why on Earth would she want to do such a thing?”

“Spectre Shepard’s wishes in this matter are quite clear, Doctor.” Tevos frowned slightly. “Since before the Normandy started the Victory Tour, she has been appalled by the Humans’ total lack of appreciation for what we have accomplished together, as a united force. The people of Earth have also demonstrated little gratitude for the lengths to which she, personally, has gone… what she has sacrificed… to the point of nearly giving her life for them… twice! Then, they frustrate her to no end by continuously asking her to do more.” The Councilor paused and shook her head. “Now, with the radical groups targeting the very leaders who are willing to work for all the races as we continue our recovery from the war… Well, simply put, the murder of Steven Hackett was the final insult and the catalyst for her decision. She intends to cut any remaining official ties with Earth… and has declared the Estate on Thessia as her permanent registered home of residence… as the first step in becoming a full Asari citizen.”

Ashley’s unhappiness was plain to see. “Councilor, I’m at a loss for words. Does she not realize people will brand her a traitor? That this could make her a target for every deranged Human supremacist with a grudge, real or imagined, with the other races in the galaxy?”

Tevos tipped her head slightly as she looked directly at the Spectre, answering with a highly unusual frankness. “I asked her that very thing, Spectre. Her response to me was that it would not be the first time she has been branded a race traitor by her own kind.” Skewering the Spectre with her eyes, Tevos continued, “She mentioned nearly losing a dear friend on Horizon during her campaign against the Collectors.”

Ashley’s mouth fell in astonishment. I shouldn’t be surprised the Skipper brought up that memory… I don’t think I realized until just this instant how terribly I hurt her. Shit! All this and more shot through her mind in milliseconds as she tried to regain her composure. “Councilor, you have my thanks for telling me…” she stole a glance at Karin. “… us, about what’s been happening on the home front. When you speak with Samantha again, please tell her…” Ashley had to stop speaking for a moment as she struggled to keep her emotions from constricting her throat. Coughing to clear the sudden obstruction, she continued, “… I… understand. Doesn’t mean I approve of her decision, but I completely understand her reasons.”
Tevos nodded once, looked at Doctor Chakwas and said, “I’m sorry to be the bearer of such a collection of unpleasant news. Please, go with the blessings of the Goddess.” Without warning, she reached down and terminated the connection, leaving the two women standing at the rail, each lost in their own thoughts as they stared into the suddenly empty projection well.

Finally straightening up, Ashley looked at Karin. “I don’t suppose you have any Serrice Ice squirreled away in the med bay, do you?”

Karin forced a slight smile as she replied, “Of course I do. Would you care to join me? One should most definitely not drink alone after hearing about the death of a dear friend. Come on.” Karin turned and left the QEC compartment, followed closely by a saddened Spectre.

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Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 30 Sep 2188

“Hey, Shep. Sorry it’s so early, your time.” Culver looked her friend over; Shepard was looking a little worse for wear. “You look like Hell… but I believe I can cheer you up a bit with good news, at least … if you can call it that under the circumstances.”

“Good news?” Shepard yawned and shook her head quickly to wake up a bit more before leaning closer to the screen. “I only care about one thing right now. Do you have Walker?”

A quick smile graced the Special Operations Commander’s face. “We do. Along with an old Cerberus… and then LEAP… ship that had been stashed as an emergency escape route. I’ve had my best folks going through the systems for the last five hours. It’s a treasure trove of info, Sam. Safe houses, rally points, weapons cache locations, the works. I’m not sure how much of it is still current, but I’ll send everything we find to Liara as soon as we finish.”

“Sounds good, Sharon… but what about Walker? Dead or alive?” Shepard held her breath waiting on the answer.

“Alive… though I can’t say well.” She chuckled lightly. “Tish cooked up one Hell of a new cocktail… That boy’s gonna have a hangover for a week. Didn’t help him any that she chased it with a Neural Shock. Collapsed him like a house of cards and he smacked his chin on the boarding steps… busting a couple of teeth and cracking his jaw… none of which we’ve treated just yet other than to deaden the pain. Not until he begins to cooperate.”

Shepard nodded, releasing the pent-up air with satisfaction. “Excellent.” She was wide awake now and her eyes narrowed in anger. “We need to know who the fuck hired him… and who, exactly, paid him, in case they aren’t one and the same. We followed the trail back to Terra Firma, but I want Charles Saracino’s head on a damned platter. I know that slippery bastard had ties to Cerberus and, I suspect, LEAP… but we haven’t found any solid evidence yet.”

“If it exists, we’ll find it. Perhaps Saracino or Terra Firma own some of the stash locations…” Sharon paused for a moment before continuing, “I’ll send that list of addresses as soon as we finish speaking, so Liara’s network get to work on that right away. If Saracino realizes that Walker or the ship, the Valiant, has been compromised, they may already be moving assets to wipe any trail.”

“Agreed. I assume you’ll also be looking?” Shepard’s face held a soft smile, knowing Sharon would do everything in her power to bring the perpetrators to justice.

“I already have two teams out to locations here on Earth. I’m hoping for the cascading dominos…” Culver let her words trail off, seeing the understanding light in Shepard’s eyes.
“Find one, which leads to the next, which leads to another…” Shepard scowled. “I would love to bring the whole tower down on their heads with this one, Sharon. I honestly believe this is the best shot we’ve ever had.”

“I agree.” Sharon smiled, probably for the first time in at least a week. “And I think we’re gonna nail their asses to the wall with this one, Shep. I really do.” She glanced at her chrono and sighed. “If you don’t need anything else, I’m going to get some sleep, then figure out my plan of attack for Walker. Info doesn’t extract itself, not from the likes of him.”

“I do have one more thing for you, Sharon.” Shepard dropped her head, and Sharon immediately became concerned something else had happened.

“What’s wrong?” The words came quickly, apprehension coloring Culver’s tone.

“I’m leaving Earth, Sharon.”

Shepard’s eyes came back up to meet hers, Sharon noting their quiet intensity as she replied, “You already have, Shep… a long time ago. You were born a spacer; you never really belonged to Earth to begin with… I think you were always destined for bigger things, so, what’s with the unnecessary worry I see scribbled all over your face?”

“I mean permanently, Sharon; I’m in the process of shifting my registered domicile to Thessia and I’m going to become an Asari citizen. I’ve already talked to Mom and Aunt Kay…” Shepard sighed. “Councilor Tevos had to relay the news to Aunt Karin for me… and Ashley… because of the comm blackout. I don’t know yet how they took it.”

Culver grinned and chuckled. “If they don’t take it well, they haven’t recognized what’s been right in front of their faces, Shep. Hell… You’ve been Asari since a couple months after you met that blue-skinned babe of yours!” Her chuckle became a full laugh as she continued, “Good for you for finally figuring it out for yourself; you know damned well that’s where you belong!” She paused, thoughtfully, and added, “Hell, it’s what you’ve been for the last five years, ever since you and Liara decided you were going to live at the Estate. It’s just like everything else in this galaxy… the paperwork simply took five years to catch up with the reality of life!”

“Well, shit.” Shepard let out a little huff and finally smiled. “If you knew all this time, why didn’t you tell me to get my ass in gear and make the change? I think it may have saved a lot of heartache over the past few years.”

Laughing, Culver replied, “Yeah… Not! You simply would have traded one set of problems for another, Sam. Nothing about life is easy… Besides, that would take all the challenge out of it. Where’s the fun in that?”
Due Process

Chapter Notes

CO - Commanding Officer

LEAP - League of Earth Alliance Patriots

Knight Shade, Palaven, Trebia – 1 Oct 2188

Following Liara’s rather detailed instructions, Riana had contacted both Sergeant Maddix and Corporal Gracelyn Medina. Maddix immediately validated the request, so Medina set to work and the lists Liara had requested came in quickly. Medina’s response had also included a contact address for Zoë Lawrence’s number two, a woman by the name of Jana Cantrell, who would be able to provide Riana with the full, unedited versions of the biodata and DNA profiles for each of the detained Atlas members.

Cantrell had been surprisingly uncooperative at first, demanding information on Zoë’s condition before she would provide any of the data. Riana had simply sneered, “Do what you want, Ms Cantrell, but you are in no position to bargain. The rules for this transaction are very simple; you send me the requested data, so I can confirm your people are who they say they are. If you comply and everything matches, they get released… at which point they can contact you directly and you can hear, first hand, about their treatment during their stay with the Marines there. If you don’t provide me with information that matches… perfectly… the data I have received from the Alliance, then their detention will be extended until you do. Period.”

Allowing Jana no time to respond, Riana continued, “Now. You have undoubtedly gleaned my ident code and comm address here aboard the Knight Shade while we have been speaking. Use it to send me the data… or don’t. Honestly, it does not matter to me in the least.” She had then reached up and terminated the call; less than ten minutes later, the Asari smiled triumphantly when the complete data packages for all six of the Atlas personnel popped into her system.

The detention department had detained the three men for trespassing in an Alliance facility, and for being in possession of falsified identification docs and, while the Cousineau sisters had been employed as temporary kitchen staff for the luncheon scheduled to take place after the dedication ceremony, forged citizenship credentials and their lack of long-term employment histories – an obvious tip-off that their histories had been ‘created’ – were the reasons for their detention. Once she sorted the data, Riana immediately set to work, carefully comparing the information on her view screens, and quickly realized the information on Tim Stafford, Boris Sutton and Rich Clemons, along with that of Émiléda and Melina Cousineau, was an item-for-item match between every independent source.

Because of Zoë Lawrence’s past interactions with her captain, Riana had felt it necessary to scrutinize the woman’s records more thoroughly than she had the others. With Zoë’s DNA profile sitting right in front of her, Liara’s First searched back through every available database. That the dark-skinned woman with the ivory-colored tribal facial tattoos had once been Maya Brooks was a proven fact; her voiceprint had been obtained during the Reaper War, and perfectly matched all of
her subsequent communications obtained during the Victory Tour. Still, Riana felt the need to find additional corroborating evidence that Maya Brooks and Zoë Lawrence were one and the same person.

After an hour of diligent searching, the commando was finally forced to admit to herself that Maya Brooks, Captain Channing, Rasa, and Hope Lilium did not appear in any current database, anywhere. The Asari could find no evidence that the names and identifying characteristics associated with each had ever existed, even in several of the more obscure records… databases maintained by alien races that were much less friendly to the Asari than to Humans or Turians. She is… or was… very thorough… came the grudging admission. … have to give her that.

Fortunately for Riana, background information about Maya Brooks did still exist; she didn’t have to search for more than a few minutes within the old Shadow Broker archives to find the files containing everything known about the woman during her entire employment run with Cerberus. Looking at the more recent Broker files, she also located all the data logged during the investigation of Maya’s attempt to kill Shepard, the collateral damage of which had nearly cost Karin Chakwas her life. The last Broker entry on Brooks before her appearance with Jack Harper on the Citadel centered on her being the primary suspect in the cold-blooded murder of Donnel Udina. With a feeling of disbelief, Riana thought, These Shadow Broker files are the only records of that assassins past activities… anywhere! Goddess! The only proof of the crimes she committed during her previous aliases!

Riana immediately located a pair of blank OSDs, queued them up in the recorder, and copied every last bit of data about the assassin, including the never released details concerning her connection to Udina’s murder. An all ‘round assassin, came the unwelcome and reluctant thought. She excels at using rifles from long range but doesn’t shy away from getting up close and personal with a blade, should it prove necessary to successfully complete her mission.

Pulling the copied data files, she carefully placed the disks in an accessory pocket within her leathers. I’ll store these with my personal gear, just in case… should it ever be required, these records could simply… reappear.

Riana’s search did uncover an interesting fact… ‘Zoë Lawrence’ had supposedly been employed by Cerberus as an analyst, prior to her termination on 31 May of the previous year… exactly one week prior to the Reaper’s destruction and the end of the war. The commando couldn’t help but grin at Brook’s one obvious oversight – the same thing that had gotten the Cousineau sisters into trouble – the created history simply didn’t go back far enough. Nowhere in the record was there a date indicating when Lawrence had been hired by Cerberus. The grin quickly faded as she thought about the level of proof this information did not provide. Doesn’t mean much, though. She could easily explain it away… all the destruction during the Reaper war… databases destroyed, records lost… any number of excuses.

With a quiet sigh of surrender, she added the name ‘Zoë Lawrence’ to the list of Atlas members validated as non-hostile, before grudgingly forwarding a summary of her results to Lady Liara and Spectre Shepard. Nara may have developed a bit of trust for her, but it will be a long time… a very long time… before I will even consider such a thing.

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“This is everything known about the people detained in Vancouver, Riana?” Spectre Shepard was reviewing the results of Riana’s research into the backgrounds of the seven people placed in custody immediately after the murders.

“With the exception of Frédéric Klein, all of them are verified members of Atlas, Captain. Zoë
Lawrence and Tim Stafford were already known to us, obviously… but, so were Boris Sutton and Rich Clemons, the other two men that accompanied Lawrence and Stafford to New York in January, when they murdered Jessica Mikhailovich. We’ve never seen the two women… the Cousineau sisters; they were in the kitchens and failed in their attempt to stop what happened to Prime Minister Trost. Unfortunately for Trost, they did not think to look for food allergies.” Riana shook her head in bewilderment. “Who in the galaxy, in this day and age, has food allergies that haven’t been treated?”

“Humans aren’t like the Asari, Riana. Gene therapy is provided only to those who can afford to pay for it.” Shepard sighed over yet another shortfall of the supposedly ‘enlightened’ Human race as she commented, “Even Traynor’s parents couldn’t afford that luxury before her birth… fortunately, Sammi doesn’t appear to have any deadly allergies to Asari cuisine.” Her slight smile evaporated as she asked, “Were you able to discover anything new about this Frédéric Klein bastard?”

Lips firmly pressed together in a straight line, she grumbled, “Other than the fact that he was sent to kill the prime minister? He very likely would have succeeded but for Zoë Lawrence.” Riana huffed, her dislike for the woman evident in her tone of voice. “A woman like Lawrence… having used cloaking generators for Goddess only knows how long… certainly knows what an individual so cloaked looks like when moving. The Marines guarding Hoffman probably would not have detected Klein before the knife he wielded was buried somewhere vital within the prime minister’s chest.”

Shepard was surprised. “Zoë Lawrence tackled this guy without knowing who he was or how he was armed?” Looking meaningfully at the Vanguard, she added, “Sounds to me like another person I know… an Asari, who has never hesitated to react to any perceived threat.”

Riana’s face turned slightly darker as she stared at her captain. “Sim’re! Are you implying that the actions of a former assassin are in any way akin to my own?”

The Spectre chuckled. “Riana, I recall a story I was told about your first-year anniversary working for House T"Soni… something about a cloaked intruder at the townhome in Armali? It just seems to me that Zoë Lawrence isn’t that much different in her goals of keeping people safe from harm.”

Holding up a hand to forestall the protest forming on the Vanguard’s lips, she added, “I’m not advocating we completely ignore her past, Riana. But we do have to deal with the present… and that means the people we are encountering now. I have come to believe that Maya Brooks is truly dead. She died, either inside the temple on Thessia, when you were so badly injured protecting Liara, or on Horizon, when we raided Henry Lawson’s lab. She was on the Crucible for the sole purpose of killing Jack Harper, not me.”

Riana remained quiet while Shepard studied the reports on the datapad for several more minutes. Only when she had finally come to a decision did Shepard break the silence. “Have Specialist Traynor contact the base commander in Vancouver and have him release all the Atlas people from custody; Spectre authority. Zoë will be confined to the hospital for a number of days yet… I would like to meet with her there. And Riana?” Shepard’s expression hardened ever-so-slightly, and Riana fully expected some form of chastisement for her obvious bias against the woman previously known as Maya Brooks. The commando was surprised when Shepard merely added, “Please ensure that Traynor reiterates my previous instructions regarding Frédéric Klein. They are to take no chances with him; I honestly believe he would chew off his own arm if it would help him escape from custody.”

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**Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 1 Oct 2188**

Jana Cantrell was troubled by the total lack of official information concerning Zoë, as well as the
three men and, especially, the Cousineau sisters… Shepard’s information officer had been anything but cooperative – downright rude, if Jana was any judge of character – stubbornly refusing to provide any information regarding the wellbeing of the Atlas agents. The Asari had repeatedly asked Jana for verifications – a copy of each of their complete bio scans and unaltered identity documents – and offered nothing in return other than a promise to obtain the same information from the Marine contingent detaining them in the newly dedicated headquarters. If, and only if, both sources could be satisfactorily cross-referenced, Shepard would invoke Spectre authority to have all five agents released from custody. The Spectre’s agent had even managed to make their potential release sound more like a threat than a promise.

Jana was nearly in tears by the time the conversation ended. On the bright side, at least Tim had managed to persuade Alliance Marine Sergeant Vassili Maddix to speak with Spectre Samantha Shepard on Palaven; all that mattered in the end was that he had garnered the Spectre’s attention and got the ball rolling.

After Nina sent the requested information to the Knight Shade, she had independently confirmed that Zoë had been the heroic civilian who was grievously injured by the assassin that had targeted Ambassador Hoffman. The discovery that Zoë had suffered a pair of stab wounds by former Cerberus assassin Frédéric Klein was like a slap in the face to Jana. Back in the day, Klein had never accepted an assignment from the Illusive Man unless the payday was huge and the getaway assured; he was so good that Jack never argued with him when he refused – whatever the excuse – he simply sent Kai Leng, or Maya Brooks after Leng’s failure to kidnap or kill the council members on the Citadel.

Nina had also discovered that Klein was locked away, incommunicado, in the same medical wing as Zoë. She handed a datapad to Jana as she said, “Apparently, Ms Lawrence attempted to shove the bastard’s larynx into his spine with her thumbs.” She continued with a smirk, “She would have succeeded if Sergeant Maddix hadn’t kicked him in the head to get him off of her. The doctors performed emergency surgery to repair his trachea; he’s also recovering from a mild concussion. It remains to be seen if he’ll be able to breathe without whistling.”

The only other thing they could glean from the news reports was that Corporal Gracelyn Medina had accompanied the medics moving Zoë into the facility for emergency surgery, and that it was very likely she had been assigned as Zoë’s guard during her post-operative recovery. As good a place to begin as any, Jana thought. She did not believe anyone there – with the possible exception of Zoë – had any knowledge of Klein’s background. It’s the closest we’ve been to the whore-son since Zoë came back in and rebranded us. I simply have to let someone there know about this.

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**Alliance Military Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 1 Oct 2188**

Corporal Gracelyn Medina had been Lawrence’s guard ever since she had attempted to staunch the flow of blood from Zoë’s wounded side during the attacks. Over the past couple of days, she had managed to learn very little about why Zoë had risked her life to prevent a cloaked assassin – someone that had gone unnoticed by virtually everyone – from reaching Ambassador Arthur Hoffman. When the release message arrived via Spectre channels during her lunch break, along with the strongly worded warning about Frédéric Klein, Medina began to believe things were making more sense.

She reasoned since Shepard apparently knew about Klein, it only made sense that Zoë, who seemed to be working with the Spectre, also knew…and was likely part of Hoffman’s protection detail. The murder of Admiral Hackett by one of their own Marines certainly explained Zoë’s silence – the poor
woman didn’t yet know for sure who she could trust… including Gracelyn. But, now that Medina had begun to figure things out on her own, she planned to speak with Zoë about the message when she returned to the patient’s room after lunch.

Then, a seemingly routine extranet message hit the inbox of her personal omnitool. The sender was Jana Cantrell, the woman Zoë had been asking them to contact since she had first regained consciousness after her emergency surgery. Medina assumed the message would ask her to have Zoë contact Jana at her earliest convenience… an assumption that could not have possibly been further from the truth.

Gracelyn read the message through three times, scarcely able to believe the dire news Cantrell had felt so important to relay. *This makes no sense! If Zoë’s organization is working for Shepard, Cantrell should realize we already know about Klein… so, what the Hell is going on?* She continued to puzzle over the mystery as she dumped her tray into the recycle bin and prepared to return to the secure wing. *Shit! Why is nothing in this life ever cut-and-dried?*

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A soft double-rap of knuckles on the door to her room brought Zoë’s head up, as Corporal Gracelyn Medina – ‘Gracie’ to Zoë – slowly entered the room. With a strained smile, she bid the woman a good afternoon before inquiring as to how she had slept. After exchanging their usual pleasantries, Medina’s smile completely dissolved, her lips pressed firmly together in a straight line, before stating, “I received a message during lunch, Zoë. A couple messages, actually… and, I’ll admit, they are more than a bit confusing… and contradictory to me.”

Zoë had grown to trust the corporal during the intervening days after her surgery… she admired her forthright, no bullshit manner; that she had quite probably kept her from bleeding out on the parade grounds had cemented a bond, tenuous as it might be, with the young Marine. “If it bothers you that much, perhaps you should keep it to yourself, Gracie. It’s not as if I’m going to leave here anytime soon.”

“That’s the problem, don’t you see?” Before she could second-guess herself, Medina spoke out. “Spectre Shepard has issued your release order… but, obviously, you’re not able to leave… at least, not yet.”

Hearing this caused Zoë’s jaw to drop. “Seriously? I’m free to go?”

“Just after surgery and missing a kidney? Not likely… There is one condition and one minor complication that came along with your release...” Medina closed her eyes and plumped down in the chair where she had spent several hours during each of the previous days. Zoë had to strain to hear the corporal’s next words. “First, the condition… Shepard says you are not to leave until she comes here to meet with you. Second, the complication… Frédéric Klein is incarcerated here, in the secure surgery wing….”

“That fuckin’ bastard nearly gutted me like a damned Varren, and he’s in this very hospital?” Zoë now possessed another piece of the puzzle, but still had no explanation as to why this should upset Gracie. Zoë’s eyes bored into Medina’s as intensely as a pair of lasers. “How much do you know about him? You must know something, if his presence here bothers you so much.”

“It’s not Klein’s presence that’s bothering me… You’ll likely feel a bit better about it, knowing that Spectre Shepard has a strict ‘no contact’ policy for the man. He’s locked up tight in a guarded medical chamber and is being kept lightly sedated.”

“Good.” Zoë closed her eyes for several moments as she fought to rein in her emotions. Blinking
them open again, she breathed, “He was a professional assassin back in the day… before the war, Gracie… excelled at completing contract murders, up close and personal, always with a double-edged straight blade.”

“Neither Klein nor his presence in this hospital is the source of my confusion…” Medina watched the expression on Zoë’s face as she continued, “That particular honor belongs to my second lunchtime message… the one I received from Jana Cantrell. If you’re working for Shepard and know all about Klein, why is it that Ms Cantrell felt compelled to send a message telling me to warn you about him? Things aren’t adding up, Zoë. Just who in Hell are you?”

“Seriously?” Zoë actually chuckled. “That’s all that’s bothering you?”

“What’s so funny?” Medina didn’t look very amused, so Zoë decided to get straight to the point.

“Before the dedication, we had only identified one of the four assassins, and it was the shooter, not Klein!” Zoë rolled her eyes. “If we had known Klein was involved, we might have done things a bit differently… well, a lot differently.” She paused and shifted on the bed, finding the controls and tipping the back up a bit more so she could speak with Gracie more easily. “Klein is a vicious bastard… and, seeing as we have been held incommunicado, Jana has no idea what’s been going on here. She has every reason to be concerned about my safety… Hell, the safety of anyone that comes in contact with him, especially if no one had identified him. Jana wasn’t involved in the actual op… so she remained back at the home station. Not being able to talk to us likely has her scared to death.”

“Home station? I don’t understand.”

“Gracie, I’ve come to trust you over the past few days, and you need to know what I’m about to tell you.” Zoë huffed as she thought about what she needed to say… and the way she needed to say it, finally beginning her explanation, “I’m the executive director of a fairly large group of people, all dedicated to keeping Humans and Aliens safe from the xenophobic beliefs espoused by organizations like LEAP, Earth First, and Terra Firma. Our work is generally low-key… we prefer to expose these people to the harsh light of day… the unforgiving judgement of public opinion, rather than take direct action. My group’s name is… Atlas.” She watched and waited to see how Medina would react to this new information.

“Atlas, huh? Why didn’t you tell me sooner, Zoë?

“I wasn’t sure…” Swallowing hard, she reached for and grasped Medina’s hand. “Please try to understand, Gracie.”

Returning the hesitant grip, Medina replied, “Okay… So, you didn’t know if you could trust me.” She shrugged. “I suppose that’s understandable, given Corporal Hamilton’s actions.” A small smile lit the corners of her mouth as she added, “Though, you have to look at it from my perspective. Me saving your ass from bleeding out should have earned me at least a little bit of trust, don’t you think?”

Zoë squeezed the hand in hers and laughed, honestly laughed, for the first time in she didn’t remember how long. With a grimace of pain, she pulled her hand back to press against her still healing, stitched up side as she responded, “You’re right, I should have… and dammit, laughing really hurts… but it feels good, Gracie.” The expression on her face softened and their eyes met. “It feels good to have found a new friend… one I now realize I can count on.”

“As long as it doesn’t break regs, I’m here to help you,” she answered with a smirk. Medina looked around. “You know, even though the Spectre’s restriction says you can’t leave the hospital yet… technically, you’re released. So, I can go to the evidence lockers and get your stuff! Would you like
“Like it? Hell, yes!” Zoë’s eyes lit up. “Does that include my omnitool?”

“Sure does!” Gracie’s smile widened as she added, “And visitors! I imagine you have a few folks who want to see you, now that they can.”

Zoë hadn’t realized just how much she missed having an omnitool on her wrist; she had just finished sending a message to Jana and one to Nina, outlining all that had happened since she had tackled and tried to choke a violently resisting and cloaked Frédéric Klein, when a soft knock on the door drew her attention. Tim Stafford, dressed in the clothes he had been wearing for the dedication, hesitantly looked past the mostly closed door as he asked, “May I come in?”

Surprising him, Zoë’s face lit up with an enormous smile as she brought her arms up and spread them wide. “Tim! I was so worried… thought they’d have you restrained down in a sub-basement flogging you with a rubber hose for info! Come here!”

Tim walked up to her bed and bent down slightly, there to have a pair of muscular arms wrap around him, hands flat against his back. “Don’t expect this kind of greeting every time I see you, Tim… but damn! It really is good to see you in one piece!” She released her embrace and placed a hand on his shoulder to pull him down a bit further; reaching up, she placed a quick kiss on his forehead. If Zoë had been prone to any shyness or embarrassment about her actions, her dark skin would have hidden any hint of a blush, and the happy smile from a few moments before faded away as she said, “If you’re visiting me, you must be free to leave the premises. I need you to get back to base, let Jana know you saw me and I’m doing okay, then get to work looking for the miserable bastards that ordered these murders.”

Stafford nodded as he replied, “Exactly what I intend to do… as soon as I get clearance from Spectre Shepard; same as you, I’ve also been restricted to base. Apparently, she wants to talk to both of us, in person, before either of us can leave. Once that happens, I’m planning to assist Jana, Nina and Max… first of all, to see if we can discover who in Hell paid Klein’s exorbitant fee to come here to kill Ambassador Hoffman.” He sat in the chair beside the bed as he added, “Jana told me that Nina had started to look for Walker’s employers, but she quickly discovered Spectre Shepard had already sent a team to capture him before he could get out of Vancouver.”

Zoë nodded her acceptance of that as she asked, “Is what I’ve been hearing really true? None of the aliens in attendance were targeted?”

“All true. This op was a conspiracy engineered by Humans to kill Humans, Zoë. Delacroix is already on the quest, searching for the trail of credits.

“So… Shepard has already snagged Walker. It was him that took that long shot, correct?”

“All the evidence points to him; Sergeant Mathieson let slip they retrieved his rifle – it was a heavily customized M-98, just like what we discussed in our earlier meetings.” Tim leaned back in his chair; in a suddenly somber tone tinged with true regret, he said, “It’s a real tragedy about Admiral Hackett… betrayed? Murdered by a member of his protection detail? Son of a bitch, Zoë! Xenophobic sympathizers in the Alliance Marines… the Navy? How in the Hell are we supposed to deal with that?”

Zoë reached for and clasped Tim’s hand. “I don’t know… the ideals that formed Cerberus didn’t just cease to exist with the Illusive Man’s death fifteen months ago. Hell, it actually seems they have
intensified since then, and sympathizers in the Marines and Navy make our own goals much more difficult to achieve.”

A twinge in her injured side caused Zoë to catch her breath; Tim noticed this and slowly stood to leave. Looking down at the hand he still held onto, he reluctantly placed it on the bed next to her and released it. “I should go. I need to call Jana and Ms Delacroix; let them know we’re okay here. Also, I may have uncovered an unhappy-with-the-state-of-the-galaxy Marine here on base so, as long as I’m stuck here, I’ll use the time to do some background on her – Sergeant Diane Häberli. She interrogated me right after I was detained. Impression I got was she was happy about the deaths, sorry about the misses and wanted to seriously kick my ass for having anything to do with the latter.”

Zoë used a hand to gently massage her side over the missing kidney and said, “Let me know if I can assist you from here. And ask Jana to come see me. As soon as I can move a bit, we could have lunch together… I could use a female friend to help me out, and Medina’s not here all the time.”

“You’ll have a guard once you’re out of the ICU recovery, won’t you?”

“I will. But, I would really enjoy having another friend at my side.” Her expression clouded as she concluded, “Never needed anyone back in the day, ya know? Now?” She left the question hanging as Tim nodded, turned and quietly left.

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Corporal Medina had come to visit Zoë after having dinner; she had been sitting in the chair beside the bed as she listened with increasing fascination to the Atlas director’s tales of a young, unidentified operative working for Cerberus, from before the Geth attack with Sovereign on the Citadel. Somehow, Zoë managed to tell the stories without revealing much, if any, critical information.

At her mention once again of Klein, Gracie’s face took on a solemn cast; she slowly unfastened the three upper clasps of her SDU jacket, reached a hand in past the collars of her blouse and undershirt and pulled out an object originally retrieved from inside one of Zoë’s boots. Holding the sheathed straight-blade knife in front of her, she asked, “Does the blade Klein preferred to use look anything like this, Zoë? It’s seems a perfect match for the one Doctor Stegmann extracted from your side… the one that’s being held as evidence for his attempt to murder you.”

Zoë attempted to keep surprise from coloring her expression. “I had nearly forgotten I had that with me. You don’t think that I…”

“It’s a perfect match, Zoë! Frédéric Klein was going to impale Ambassador Hoffman with a knife that’s a virtual twin to this one, right down to the Cerberus emblem on the hilt… instead, he used it in an attempt to gut you. Can you offer me a rational explanation as to how you came to be in possession of this weapon?”

“I took it from a Cerberus assassin that died on the Citadel,” came the partial lie. “It’s simply a souvenir… to remind me of my true purpose when things become difficult.” With a small sigh, she concluded, “You already know I lived a very different lifestyle before the Reaper War.”

“Care to elaborate?”

Zoë had grown to like Gracie, if not as a friend, then certainly as a non-hostile ally. Would she think less of me if I admitted to being a stone-cold killer? Dropping her eyes in regret, she breathed her response. “No… I’m afraid I can’t.”
“Can’t… or won’t?” Medina’s expression was unreadable as she stood up. Placing her hands on the edge of the bed, she leaned over Zoë so she could look straight into the woman’s ebony eyes. “My gut tells me you’re lying about this blade, Ms Lawrence,” she accused softly. “By every regulation I am sworn to uphold, I should have logged this blade into evidence and reported my suspicions regarding you to my CO.”

Zoë wasn’t ready to concede anything. “Evidence of what, Gracie?” Zoë whispered, not quite ready to trust this woman enough to admit to being a paid assassin in her past life. “I saved Ambassador Hoffman… and all you have is a clean knife and your suspicions. Do us both a favor, please? Give it back to me, and forget you found it.”

The corporal held her position in front of Zoë for what seemed a lifetime before nodding her head ever so slightly while pushing up to a standing position. Stepping over to the small closet, she placed the sheathed dagger in the top of the woman’s right boot, then turned back to Zoë with a corner of her mouth tipped up slightly. Refastening the clasps of her jacket, she replied, “It’s already been forgotten, Zoë. I hope you never find yourself in a position where you have to use it… and that you never violate the trust I’m placing in you by returning it to you.”

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Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 2 Oct 2188

Surprisingly relaxed, Walker watched the colonel as she entered the room and sat down at the far end of the long, rectangular table between them. He remained quiet as he met her eyes; studying the obvious military lifer in silent contemplation, he waited for her to break the silence. With Sharon’s eyes boring into his, she finally spoke… her quiet authority dominating the space. “I’m not going to bullshit you, Mr Walker; you’re in quite the predicament here… a massive amount of trouble which will prevent you from ever leaving here as a free man, no matter what is said or done in this room today.”

Walker leaned back in his chair and casually dropped his arms in his lap. “So, what’s the point of talking to you, Colonel? As it seems my fate has already been decided, just tell me what the Hell it is and be done with it.”

“A true fatalist.” Culver smiled lightly and continued, “You won’t ever be a free man again but, perhaps, you can set the terms of your imprisonment. Cooperate, and you could be set up in a nice place, just enough people to watch over you, and you could live out your life in relative luxury… Or not, and you could go to a prison work camp until you dwindle to a bag of bones and die of old age before you reach the age of seventy.”

“Such wonderful choices.” Walker’s expression did not reflect the forced joviality of his words. “The real question, then, is what do I need to tell you to get the most favorable outcome? I never have been one to partake in much socialization. I find most people agonizingly tedious to converse with; dullards who would please me more if they would simply leave me alone and not feel compelled to chat. I would relish living out the rest of my days in solitary luxury, protected at Systems Alliance expense and never having to look over my shoulder. It sounds… idyllic.”

Mistrusting such seemingly willing compliance, Sharon studied the expression on Walker’s face as she listed her expectations. “At a minimum, we want everything you know about the overall assassination plot… Then, we expect the minutest of details on your part… where the name of the individual… or individuals… who hired and paid you – not just the organization – are non-negotiable pieces of the puzzle.” Sharon narrowed her eyes and finished, “This is a one-time offer, Mr Walker, so the more details you give us regarding the entire event – from start to finish – that we can verify, the more options you will have for your future with us.”
“Is that all?” Walker chuckled. “You want me – an assassin recognized for confidentiality and discretion – to give you an exposé on my failure to deliver? Have you totally lost your mind?”

Shrugging, Sharon replied nonchalantly, “That’s entirely possible… I’ve been called a crazy bitch more than a few times in my career. Even so… is my insanity coupled with your ability to live out your life in secluded luxury such a bad combination?”

“Fix my damned teeth and jaw as a show of good faith and I’ll tell you what you want to know.” The smugness vanished from his face as fast as the flash of brightness after a bolt of lightning and he sat forward in his chair, placing his shackled hands on the edge of the table that sat between them, his knuckles turning white with the force of his grip. “I owe those bastards nothing, Colonel. They refused two of my funding requests for certain equipment that would have guaranteed my escape, giving me inferior substitutions that have cost me my equipment, my livelihood… and, quite apparently, my freedom. They wanted premium service at a budget rate; nowhere in my contract was I required to fall on my sword if captured, so screw ’em! Their willingness to hang me out to dry works both ways…”

Walker suddenly laughed, a bone-chilling sound that sent a shiver down Culver’s back, before he added, “Even if you’re blowing smoke up my ass and planning to throw me to the dogs after I tell you everything, I have no doubts you’ll go after those stingy pricks. Just knowing that… even if I’m dead or wasting away in some shithole… that you’re going to bury them? That is the very definition of sweet revenge.” He sat back in his chair again, relaxed and with a smug expression on his face once more. “Get me to an oral surgeon and I’ll be ready to begin as soon as I can speak again.”

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Rio de Janeiro, Earth, Sol – 3 Oct 2188

The next morning, Walker awoke to find himself in a well-appointed room, a fine suit hanging in an open armoire, along with all the necessary accoutrements. His hand rose to his chin and he wiggled his jaw; the excruciating ache that had been present since he had awakened in Alliance custody had faded to a dull memory. His index finger carefully probed his mouth, finding implants where two gaps had existed the day before and he smiled.

Well… I’ll be. Maybe they aren’t joking after all.

As soon as he climbed out of bed and slipped into the luxurious robe laid across the bedside chair, it became immediately obvious he was being watched, as a male attendant stepped into the room. “Good morning, Mr Walker. Would you care for breakfast in your room, or would you prefer to visit the dining room? The view overlooking the bay is truly quite exquisite.”

Not honestly expecting an answer, he flatly queried, “Where am I?”

The attendant simply smiled. “You are in one of the secure VIP suites within the Isle of Galeão Military Hospital. As you have likely noted, your surgery went very well… so, following breakfast, you will be escorted to Colonel Culver’s office to begin your debriefing.”

“Debriefing… not interrogation.” Walker chuckled softly. “I suppose this whole charade is intended to give me a taste of how my life will be, should I cooperate, no?”

“Yes, Sir, it is… but it is no charade; this morning should be considered a live demonstration of the treatment you could enjoy for the remainder of your life.” The attendant’s expression grew foreboding as he concluded, “And trust me on this, Sir; there are a great many people in the Alliance Military who are hoping to see this entire process end quite differently… If I were you, I would place my complete trust in Colonel Culver and act accordingly. You do not want to be difficult and be removed from her charge; I can promise you that.”
Defectors Among Us

Chapter Notes

Notes: Shmex warning! After our couple returns to the Knight Shade and they begin to talk about their unique link… and lasts until change of scene.

Aka - Also Known As

Grá mo chroí - love of my heart (Gaelic)

Gráim thú - I love you (Gaelic)

Ionúin Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

LEAP - League of Earth Alliance Patriots

Le’wëth - the soft ridges extending from beneath the rear of the scalp, merging into the back of the neck (Source: CDN)

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Offices of the Primarch, Palaven, Trebia – 3 Oct 2188

Mandibles wide-spread, Garrus stared at his long-time friend in slack-jawed amazement, searching for the necessary words to convey his shock at Shepard’s announcement. If he had been in his home instead of standing in his private office within the Primarch’s compound, he would have poured and downed a generously stiff measure of brandy in an attempt to settle his thoughts.

A few moments of stunned silence felt like forever to the big Turian; he finally caught his breath and moved to take a seat in a nearby chair; from there, he returned his questioning gaze to the Human Spectre and spoke in a low voice, the flanging notes of his speech rolling in and around as counterpoint to the echoing of his sub-harmonics. “Spirits… Are you absolutely sure of this?” Continuing quickly before she could formulate a reply, he said, “You can’t simply… stop being Human, Shepard! To the best of my knowledge, it’s completely unprecedented for the Asari to welcome a Human as a naturalized citizen of Thessia. I… don’t know what to say!”

“Well, you could offer your good wishes for the transition, old friend.” With a smirking chuckle, she added, “It’s not as if I’m leaving the damned galaxy behind on a one-way trip to Andromeda. I almost wish I’d been awake for that… Liara and I just might have taken them up on the offer.”

“Personally, I’m glad you weren’t… and didn’t.” Garrus nodded his head slowly, in an imitation of a Human gesture… her gesture… he had seen countless times. “As for congratulations, you most certainly have that, Shepard… for what it’s worth. I’m not so sure the path you have chosen will be an easy one.” Thinking of what she had not said, he added, “Since you appear to be committed to this course of action, I probably don’t need to remind you that it’s likely the most difficult task will be relinquishing your citizenship in the Systems Alliance.”
“I really don’t understand why people keep saying that,” Shepard scoffed. “The Systems Alliance is merely Humanity’s representative body to the Council; they’re the liaison for coordinating our military actions and exploratory expeditions within Council space… and now, apparently, overseeing the establishment of economic treaties with our allies.” She chuckled softly and added, “I don’t belong to them anymore, Garrus… not since they let me resign my commission. On Earth, technically, I’m considered a citizen of Ireland in the United Kingdom… because that’s where my parents were born… and, while they might not like me changing citizenship, folks do it all the time, especially if they marry someone from a different part of the world.”

Holding up a hand to stop her justification and press his point, Garrus added, “But you’re not just moving across the world, you’re moving halfway across the damned galaxy! They will brand you a traitor to humanity, Shepard. You’ll become a target for every low-life bounty hunter in the Terminus and Attican Traverse.”

“And you honestly think that’s different from how things are now? The people who believe that have felt that way since Liara and I became a couple. I’ve already been labeled a race-traitor by the ungrateful bastards… and how many people have tried to kill either me or Liara in the past three years, Garrus?” She huffed in disgust before shaking her head as if to clear away the bothersome thoughts. “Besides which, I have long since ceased to care about what others think of me. Liara and I have discussed this… extensively, and we’re moving to Thessia. Period. We’ve already spoken with Councilor Tevos and put the request in motion so, as soon as these trade talks are over, she will be meeting with Osoba to inform him of our decision. And, unless he wants me to start a serious shitstorm, he’ll not get in the way of letting it happen.” She paused only long enough to shrug. “Honestly? I don’t believe he would deny me anything I asked for… not after I risked my own life to save him from a bullet.”

“And you are totally serious about this… No misgivings?”

The Spectre drew her shoulders into a shrug and answered, “It’s no big deal, Garrus. I’m a spacer – born on an Alliance Cruiser assigned to the Second Fleet. Been traipsing around space longer than all the time I ever spent on Earth.” She had plopped down into the nearest chair as she spoke and kicked her feet out, crossing her legs at her ankles as she continued, “… My parents’ heritage branded me as an Irish citizen on Earth, but I already consider Thessia my home. I believe it has been such ever since I accompanied Liara to Armali…” Feeling her throat tighten from the memories of that time, she coughed to clear it before continuing, “and then the Estate… where I proposed and became her Promised.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Shepard, but T’Soni has a vested interest in seeing you become a full citizen of the Asari republic. I cannot conceive of her ever discouraging you from taking this course of action.”

“I can’t honestly say you’re wrong about that,” Shepard chuckled. “But Liara simply wants what’s best for me… what’s best for us. During our discussions, she made sure to point out some of the pitfalls we might encounter. All that said, I truly want this, Garrus… and I plan to spend the rest of my very long life there, to raise my Asari children on Asari soil. And the way I see it, if I’m going to live there, I need to be an active participant in the Asari process… and I can only do that if I am registered as a citizen of Thessia.”

“Not attempting to dissuade you in the least, but don’t you think Humanity could be better served by you retaining your Alliance citizenship?”

“I’ve served Humanity long enough, Garrus… and I’m not a Systems Alliance officer anymore. I’m a Council Spectre now, and I can’t afford to play favorites, including for Earth… especially for
Earth. Yet, everyone seems to expect me to be the Alliance Council lackey, just because I’m a
damned Human, so I’m creating distance. Tevos doesn’t have those expectations of me regarding
the Asari, so I’ll be free to side with ‘right’ instead of ‘race’ and not have it held against me.”
Samantha took a deep breath, held it for several moments, then released it. “I have to do this,
Garrus… for my own peace of mind and Liara’s and my joint future with our kids.”

“Alright then.” The big Turian rose from his chair and moved to stand in front of her, sticking his
hand out and drawing her up from the chair into which she had so casually fallen. “Not that you
need it, but you have my support, Shepard. Seems you’ve thought this thing through and you’ve
made your call… so go with it.” So saying, he opened his arms and embraced her in a heartfelt hug.

Her own arms around him, she whispered, “I may not need it, but it means a lot, Garrus! Thank
you.” She released the hug and stepped back with a grin. “Now. Is it too early to break away from
work for a celebratory drink at the bar?”

“It’s never too early!” His mandibles waggled in humor as he added, “Just don’t be introducing me
to any more Turian females. Dee would clip my fringe!”

Palaven, Trebia, At Large – 4 Oct 2188

“Spectre Shepard? A moment, please?” She turned toward the voice, a welcoming smile on her
face which only Liara could elicit by simply speaking her name. The Asari was also smiling… a
very, very pleased smile… as she walked toward the Human and it made Shepard curious, mostly
because Liara was purposely blocking the link and giving her absolutely no hints about why she had
sought her out at the extended trade talks.

As such, her brow raised at Liara’s seemingly playful mood. “Dr T’Soni… What a pleasant
surprise. Do you need something?”

“Quite the opposite, Captain.” Liara handed her a data pad and patiently waited as the Spectre
opened the interface and began to peruse its contents. The surprise on Shepard’s face grew as she
scanned through the surprisingly detailed… and lengthy… testimony.

“Holy Hell!” Finally, Shepard’s head lifted and she stared at the Asari in disbelief. “He gave them
all of this? Willingly?”

Fighting to contain the grin that desperately wanted to erupt on her lips, Liara answered, “Yes. All
of it. Sharon said that once Walker started talking, he told the entire story, non-stop… speaking for
just over three hours.” The grin finally won out and she was forced to pause as a laugh escaped her
throat. “Goddess, Shepard! The only reason he stopped there was because his recently repaired jaw
started to hurt, so he wanted to take a break. He says it is only the beginning, but it is already more
than we could have possibly hoped for!”

“Apparently, Sharon’s approach worked much better than expected.” Shepard continued to scroll up
and down through the copious amount of data as she continued, “All of this is going to take a while
to verify…”

“Yes,” Liara interrupted. “I’ve already forwarded it to Miranda and Oriana, so they can begin
searching records. Miranda is going to focus on various data bases and Oriana and her team will
look through public records surrounding the various time frames.”

“My concern is the current events.” Shepard raised her eyes from the data pad to meet Liara’s blues.
“I’m sure you already told them to focus on that first… the rest can come later.”

“Of course.” Liara nodded. “Barla Von had already traced the various exchanges between accounts for Walker’s payment, but with the additional data, he should be able to locate the actual transaction records and pull the digital authorization codes.” The Shadow Broker’s smile vanished with the comment, “From that, we’ll identify who actually authorized the payments. Added to the contract notification… which, apparently, Walker was more than willing to provide… we’ll have what we need to arrest whoever signed it, with multiple charges; conspiracy, treason, assault, attempted murder…”

“And more importantly, if Saracino wasn’t stupid enough to do it himself, we should be able to use that leverage to get them to roll on the boss, exactly like Sharon did with Douglas Walker.”

Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 7 Oct 2188

Culver smiled as she hit the send button; Douglas Walker’s full testimony was now on its way to the Knight Shade, where she knew it would be quickly dissected for accuracy and validity. Since his medical treatment was complete, Walker would be relocated from the hospital to a secure facility in the state of Pará, Brazil, for the duration of the verification process; if it all worked out, he would remain there the rest of his days. She pushed away from her desk and took a relaxed, leisurely stroll to the hospital, eventually making her way to his room.

He opened the door at her knock and smiled knowingly. “So, my time here is done, no?” He stepped back and motioned her into the room, the two guards at the doorway accompanying her as she entered.

“Yes, Mr Walker, it is. We’ll be moving you to your new home in the morning… assuming, of course, what you have told us pans out and you actually get to stay there.”

“Oh, believe me, it will.” Walker’s smile faded. “I had every reason to comply with your requests… and every reason to continue being cooperative, else have my life terminated rather prematurely.” He forced a smile onto his face again as he made light of his circumstances, “Assuming, of course, what you promised me pans out and I get to live out my days in paradise.”

“I have to be honest, Mr Walker. While I appreciate the assistance you have given us, I certainly could have done without your reason for being here in the first place… and I won’t miss our daily chats in the least.”

“You wound me, Colonel.” He sat at the small dining room table and invited her to take the seat across from him with a wave of his hand. “And here I thought we had come to some sort of mutual understanding.”

“I did what I needed to do to get your testimony quickly and you did what you needed to do to stay alive.” Sharon ignored his invitation to sit as she scowled at the man. “My preference, once I deliver you to your new home, is to never see you again, as should be yours… because if I do, it will only be because they need me to identify your body after an attempted escape or to verify your death of natural causes. That is my understanding of our arrangement, Mr Walker.”

In response, he simply blinked and canted his head in a muted nod of acceptance. “I don’t suppose I get to know where I’m going?”

“Absolutely not. You’ll figure it out soon enough… when you wake there in the morning.” Sharon
activated her omnitool. “Bring in the transport pod, please.”

Walker stood in surprise when the door opened and three attendants slid a stasis pod in through the door. “You’re making me travel in that?”

“Yes, we are… to ensure we avoid any potential complications. You have thirty minutes to pack whatever personal items you’ve accumulated over the past week here.” She signaled, and the med techs opened the pod, pulling out a number of collapsible storage boxes and popping them open, ready to be used. “Take only what you want; we’ll be happy to dispose of anything you leave behind.”

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**Terra do Meio Ecological Station, Earth, Sol – 8 Oct 2188**

Douglas Walker slowly opened his eyes and yawned, sitting up and glancing around the very nicely appointed room. *So far so good, but they must have doped me as they removed me from stasis.* Rising from the luxurious bed, he ran his hand down his silk pajamas and walked to the master suite bathroom. He smiled softly; his personal affects had been collected from his penthouse and been relocated, exactly as he’d requested… though he was absolutely positive each individual item had been run through a very thorough scanning process.

He relieved himself and rinsed the bidet before grabbing the robe hanging on the back of the door and making his way out to the main room. His hopes of being left completely alone were shattered when he was met by a man who Douglas felt sure was an agent disguised as a valet.

“Good morning, Mr Walker. I am Daniel, your personal attendant.” He motioned at the dresser. “All of your clothes, along with the rest of your personal effects, have been brought here. I took the liberty to arrange them as best I was able, based on the pictures provided to me. I hope there are no surprises.”

“My only surprise was your presence,” Walker growled. “I thought I made it very clear I wanted no one but the guards… who are to remain at a distance, so I don’t have to see them any more than necessary.”

Daniel stopped in his tracks and turned to face his charge. “If that is truly what you desire, I will disappear, Mr Walker. The house is completely stocked with most of the items you asked for… minus the weapons list….” He pointed at an intercom system on the wall. “… and that is the communications system; there is an identical interface in every room. You are under 24-hour surveillance, so you can contact someone at any time of day by simply pressing the button.” He bowed cordially and smiled. “We will do our best to make your stay with us comfortable, Mr Walker. Enjoy your solitude.”

After Daniel walked out, Walker opened the armoire, selected a pair of trousers and a starched shirt and dressed quickly. “Why the fuck do I need an attendant? I’ve lived on my own for years… don’t trust anyone to cook for me…” He huffed and shook his head. “And what time I can waste on exploration would have been taken from me if he showed me where everything is.”

His eyes scanned the room, easily locating the pinhole camera. “Tell Daniel to not take it personally. Perhaps, if he knows how to play chess, I may engage him in a game… later.”

Walker made his way to the living area and paused thoughtfully; he understood why his bedroom would be kept dark, but not the living room. He walked to a large window and threw open the drapes. “Holy fuck.” As he gazed out the window, he realized he was staring out at a tree canopy…
a rainforest tree canopy. “What in Hell?”

He made his way quickly to a set of double doors, which he assumed would open to a balcony. He opened the righthand door and stepped out, approaching the edge and staring out at the trees, quickly realizing he was in a small cluster and nestled high in the canopy. He immediately began to wonder if the house even touched the ground… or if he was imprisoned in a tree house, with no access to the forest floor. From the balcony, he retreated indoors and located the lift, pressing the button for the lowest level… labeled ‘Veranda.’

When the lift stopped, he cautiously stepped out and sighed with relief; he found himself on a sizeable patio, screened on all four sides, but definitely at ground level. There was an open firepit, with a sizeable supply of wood stacked against the side of the lift cage and a positively wonderous view of the forest floor. He had expected dense undergrowth, so was pleasantly surprised by the view, quickly realizing it had been cleared for quite a distance in all directions. Off to the east, based on the position of the sun, was a small river – not nearly large enough to be the Amazon. Must be some minor tributary… of what, though?

He noticed an area where numerous vines still hung from the trees, so wandered slowly in that direction. Years of habit stepped in and, without thinking, he found himself taking detailed mental notes on his surroundings. When he arrived at his destination, he realized it was an exercise area, literally carved out of the forest itself. His hand came up and he rubbed his chin in thought, making him realize he needed a shave. Beyond that space was a wide clearing; it stretched off in the distance to each side and Walker quickly realized it was a border zone. The trees had been removed to a width of roughly twenty meters, leaving a clear zone between his new habitation and the outside world. He could just barely make out an extremely tall security fence against the backdrop of undergrowth on the far side.

With a heavy sigh, he turned and began to walk back toward his exquisite prison, whistling as he went and adding his sad melody to that of the many exotic birds singing happily in response. Once he reentered the lift, he rode in silence to the main level, ready to begin a detailed exploration of his new abode.

This is an extraordinary location… obviously remote and likely somewhere in Amazonia. I wonder if I will eventually be permitted to go on Safari… or, at least, a guided hike? If not… just how quickly will I begin to go stir crazy in this place… from such a mundane existence… and begin seeking interesting ways to hasten my own premature demise?

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Knight Shade, Palaven, Trebia – 10 Oct 2188

Shepard sat quietly in the lounge, her mind whirling as she thought of everything that had happened over the past couple of years. She was only 34 years old, with a potentially much longer lifespan than normal – the true length of which was yet to be determined – and the newest discovery by Miranda had her staring through the large viewport into the sea of stars above Palaven. Miri and Jude had been hunting through old unsolved assassination files, looking for anything and everything they could potentially link to the recent testimony of Douglas Walker, when they confirmed a particularly interesting piece of information.

The sharpshooter had his start in the Alliance military as a sniper by the name of Rocky Kotara. He vanished during an assignment and was presumed dead when, in reality, he had been recruited by Jack Harper. Following his induction into Cerberus, he worked and trained as an assassin for approximately seven years before being assigned to Terra Firma. His initial task had been to eliminate Claude Menneau and then infiltrate the political party… Assuming he was successful, he
was then to gain Charles Saracino’s trust and guide the new party leader toward a path more ‘acceptable’ to Harper’s philosophy regarding Human interactions with alien cultures.

That little tidbit had led Miranda to hunt more thoroughly through Cerberus records. She didn’t remember ever hearing the man’s name – not during the entire time she had worked for Jack Harper… and certainly not while she was the Illusive Man’s Chief of Operations – so she was left to discover exactly which operations Kotara, aka Walker, had been assigned to in the early days of Cerberus. The most shocking data she managed to discover had little to do with Walker; instead, her search had led her to a small cache of the Illusive Man’s early-era private records… buried deep in multiple layers of sub-files… regarding the origin and intent of Project Lazarus. What they revealed had resulted in Shepard and Liara’s rather long discussion about their future… and cemented their decision regarding Shepard becoming an Asari citizen.

Shepard let out a penitent sigh, knowing that rehashing the data repeatedly in her mind wouldn’t change it… and it most certainly couldn’t make her unlearn it… but she couldn’t stop herself. Part of it was guilt; while she had explained most of her reasons for leaving Earth and the Systems Alliance to her family and close friends … she and Liara had decided to keep this latest information to themselves. Shepard felt it was a lie of omission… but a lie none the less… and consoled herself with possibly yet another – that she would eventually tell her mother, at the very least, the full truth that she was truly no longer fully Human. She huffed and admitted the truth, at least to herself. *Most likely, I’ll never tell a soul outside of those who already know.*

Her mind wandered once more, back to the end of the war. After all the Illusive Man’s assurances that he wanted the ‘real’ Shepard, he still had Wilson install a damned fail-safe to ensure Shepard would die if she ever turned her back on the man. Miranda had been appalled when they had discovered the modification to Shepard’s bio-amp even existed. Their newfound knowledge of the minor circuit had prompted the three-woman team – Miranda, Chloe and, eventually, Karin – to run an exhaustive series of additional testing. Much to everyone’s relief, the tests had turned up nothing and Shepard and Liara had been reassured by the entire medical team that absolutely zero Reaper tech remained in her body.

Everyone involved knew that Shepard had received gene therapy and genetic upgrades during her two-year medical coma. But, once Miranda shifted her loyalties, she had informed Shepard of additional cybernetic upgrades that were available. After they had unequivocally determined that no Reaper tech was involved in their development or within their construct, Shepard had opted to complete the additional upgrades – the heavy bone, muscle, and skin weaves – with Liara’s blessing and encouragement.

A smile returned to the Spectre’s face as she recalled the Asari’s words, a blue hand resting over Shepard’s heart as Liara spoke them to her. "*I love you for your soul, Siame, and if bone weaves will strengthen your charge, muscle weaves will allow you to make those seemingly impossible jumps, and skin weaves will make you more impervious to those bullets you always seem to run into, then by all means. Do them, my love.*"

The smile faded once again. The fact that her enhanced body was physically superior to any organic Human – male or female – was no secret. What they hadn’t understood was the full extent of the genetic modifications… and Shepard still wasn’t sure exactly how she felt about them, now that she knew even more about what they had done to her body. The newly discovered Lazarus files contained information regarding a team of Cerberus researchers who had genetically mapped a variety of other levo-amino life forms. They were studying the various DNA structures to locate the specific locations and sequencing of what Cerberus determined to be the more *desirable* traits; strength, speed, resilience and biotics, to name a few.
What they did next was beyond any established ethical boundaries of the time; they mapped those sequences to equivalent locations within the Human genome, spliced them in, and then grew multiple clones, each to determine which sequences had the highest success rates at remaining viable within Human DNA and transferring the desired characteristics to the Human body. Shepard leaned forward and dropped her head into her hands. Thinking about this shit gives me a headache… and I don’t know how to turn it off. Don’t know that I can… I don’t even know what I am anymore.

Shortly after that errant thought wafted across the link, Liara appeared in the lounge, moving directly to the couch and sitting at Shepard’s side as she whispered urgently in the woman’s ear. “You are still Human, Samantha! This information changes nothing in regard to who you are.” Liara smiled softly and ran the backs of her fingers softly down her Siame’s face. “If you think about it scientifically, Sam, the Illusive Man’s process was not all that different from Asari reproduction… It is possible that the seed for his idea originated with us. What he accomplished through gene therapy is not dissimilar to what we do within a procreation meld. As Asari, we locate and select the desired characteristics of our chosen mate and then arrange our genetic code to emulate the qualities within the Asari genome. The child produced by our mating process is very much Asari, no matter what species the selected patterns originate from… just as you are very much Human, no matter where the Illusive Man may have located the DNA sequences that were then integrated into your genetic construct.”

The corner of Shepard’s mouth twitched up into a smirk and her subdued voice carried more than a hint of teasing sarcasm as she replied, “And that’s supposed to make me feel better, T’Soni? Knowing that not only I am the result of some mad scientist’s genetic experiment… but that our future children will share my fate?”

Before Liara could answer, Shepard leaned forward and captured her blue lips in an affectionate kiss, letting the love she felt for her Ionuín Álainn flow freely through the link as her fingers crept up to slide tenderly across Liara’s sensitive Le’wěth, sending a shiver of pleasure down the Asari’s spine. {Grá mo chroí… you always know just what to say. Gráim thú, Liara.}

In response, Liara placed her hands against Shepard’s shoulders and pushed her slowly over on the sofa before climbing up onto her knees to straddle her bondmate and sink down slowly to sit lightly upon the woman’s hips. “It is easy to speak the truth, Sam.” Liara’s soft blue eyes shined with devotion as her hands wandered the woman’s body. “Like your sculpted torso… and these wonderfully formed shoulders and strong arms… Do you believe it bothers me to think you can hold onto me so securely only because you are enhanced with a trace of Krogan musculature? You’re not the only one in the room who is part Krogan, you know.”

Shepard couldn’t help but to laugh until Liara leaned over and placed a quick peck on now smiling lips before whispering, “And our link? Goddess! I don’t know what we would do without it… it is so unique… and positively wonderful! I think it very likely to be a result of the theory Judea proposed… that it is merely an unexpected side-effect of the Asari biotics coding that was part of your genetic modification. A trait that certainly didn’t manifest before you were altered during your reconstruction… and one which I find very desirable.”

Staring down at her with an intensity that made Shepard quiver beneath her, the Asari engulfed the woman’s lips with her own as a blue hand trailed down rock-hard abs to undo Shepard’s belt. Samantha attempted to intercept her, only to gasp as an image of what Liara wanted to do to her slammed shamelessly into her mind. She whispered breathily, “Li… We’re in the ship’s lounge, for Gods’ sake.”

Liara grinned wolfishly and asked, “And your point?” Samantha answered with a groan of desire as skilled blue fingers curled into moist heat; no amount of self-restraint or concern over their public
location could prevent her hips from rocking in her search for pleasure.

Liara wasted no time and, as the first arc of biotics fluttered through her insides, Shepard’s head pushed back into the cushion as her insides spasmed joyously in response to the sudden and unexpected biotic stimulation. “Ah… fuck!” she growled, Sam’s hands snaking between the quads and calves of Liara’s bent legs as she sought any anchor point she could find. “When did you become so damned Asari?”

Through the link, Liara could sense the meaning behind Shepard’s question. Once their bonding preparations began in earnest, Liara had begun to exhibit more typical Asari Maiden behavior… but only once – and hidden beneath the bubbles in the spa at the townhome – had they made love in such a public location. Not that Shepard was dismayed… or complaining in any manner… about what was happening at present; she was simply dumbfounded by Liara’s brazen actions.

“After the last time you almost died…again… but survived so we could actually bond, I vowed I would never waste even a moment of the remaining time I had with you, Siame.” Liara fell silent, concentrating on what she was doing and grunting with effort to keep up with Shepard’s growing desire and constantly increasing pace. Between breaths, she finally continued “I believe… Humans have an … antiquated saying… Carpe Diem… Live for the day?”

“Seize the day… actually… You and your…” Shepard grinned up at her just as Liara sent yet another pulse surging through her fingertips. “… ahhhh!” She stopped talking and her eyes almost rolled up in her head as the powerful tremor seemed to begin in her legs, only to spread its bliss quickly upward through her entire body. All she could do was buck her hips in pure ecstasy as Liara drew her out; the positively delightful, protracted release stealing away any remaining ability to think clearly, much less form coherent speech.

When her body finally collapsed in exhaustion following the consummation of Liara’s efforts, Shepard’s eyes remained closed while she focused on drawing breath into her burning lungs, hoping her breathing would return to some semblance of a normal rhythm. She felt gentle kisses chasing the freckles across her cheeks and bridge of her nose, and she started to giggle, while opening her eyes to find Liara stretching out beside her. She tried to capture Liara’s lips with her own, but her muscles still refused to fully cooperate, her reactions slowed by the lassitude and total serenity that filled her, body and soul.

Stopping her little pecks to meet Samantha’s pitiful, failing attempts, Liara pressed their lips together as she extracted her fingers, slowly and stopping intermittently to ease the jolts caused by their movement across Samantha’s overly sensitized area. Once free, she gently cupped the neatly trimmed patch of hair that covered the juncture between the Spectre’s normally powerful, muscular legs. “I don’t care about anything, Siame, except you being here… now and forever. And, just in case it is not blatantly obvious, know that I love you as you are, Samantha Shepard… more than anything else in the galaxy.”

Vision blurred by the mist in her eyes, Shepard had to swallow the lump in her throat before she could say, “I love you, too, Liara, and… thank you; for everything.” She finally managed to push herself up onto an elbow and peered into the Asari’s deep caerulean eyes, the tide of emotion sweeping through the link threatening to overwhelm them both. Raising her hand to gently cup a soft blue cheek, she whispered, “Let’s continue this in our quarters… because I want you naked, with the heat from the full length of your gorgeous body pressed against my augmented, heavy latticed skin…” She smirked as she finished, “…and that is not something I wish to share with the crew. You’re all mine, T’Soni.”

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Sheldon Webster took several appreciative swigs of ale from his pint glass; wiping the foam mustache away with a wadded-up paper napkin, he carefully set the glass down in the middle of the heavy cardboard coaster, meant to preserve the finish of the polished surface of the antique wood bar, and looked around the place. It had been just over two years since the worst threat to humanity’s continued existence – Hell! The entire galaxy’s existence! – had initiated an all-out attack on Earth and every other space-faring race; well over a year had passed since the Reapers had been destroyed. Webster had not seen the extent of the city’s destruction during the initial attack, but in the ten months since his previous visit, it appeared that the reconstruction efforts had made huge strides in returning things to some semblance of normal.

Taking another swig from his glass, he quietly belched, then sighed as his thoughts drifted back to the first Friday of January. He had traveled to Atlas Headquarters on the Fraser River to attend a Saturday memorial service in honor of Angelique Warren and Marisa Frost. He had met the agents in 2187 during their visit to New Cousteau, the main human colony on the planet Trident in the Hoplos System.

Their brutal murders at the hands of LEAP’s second-in-command Marco Tilzer had shocked everyone in the Atlas organization. Their deaths, in addition to the Christmas Day massacre of his colleagues and their families in the colony, had prompted a good deal of soul searching upon his return to the colony. In the intervening days and weeks, he had done his level best to recruit new members for the New Cousteau Atlas Chapter. Cassie Meyers, his second in command, had grown increasingly concerned about his mental state, particularly since he had begun ceding more responsibility for overseeing day-to-day operations of the division; it had come as no surprise to her when he had quietly announced his resignation from Atlas, effective the first day of June. What had surprised her was his stated intention to ultimately leave New Cousteau behind… forever.

Sighing with a mixture of sadness and regret, he drained his glass and motioned to the bartender for a refill. Once another full glass was in front of him, he stared into the depths of the amber liquid as he thought about his upcoming meeting with Atlas’ senior leadership. He had expected that he would be meeting with Jana Cantrell; what he had not envisioned was that Zoë Lawrence, the hardened former top assassin for Cerberus, would be in an Alliance hospital recovering from serious injuries received while preventing a cloaked attacker from killing the human ambassador to Palaven, Arthur Hoffman. Of some real concern, Tim, Boris and Rich had all been detained by the Alliance for trespass and the possession of forged documents; he had heard that Zoë herself wasn’t immune to being charged for the same minor infractions. Apparently, the ability of some human-centric organization to successfully infiltrate and murder both the Prime Minister and his military secretary… the top two positions in the military, had the Vancouver leadership running around in a state of nearly blind panic.

Finally hoisting his glass to take a couple of appreciative swallows of the fine ale, he mused, *I couldn’t have chosen a time more inconvenient for Jana if I had tried!* As he sipped his beer, he continued to think about his next day meeting with the Atlas research director, a title that belied Jana’s importance as Zoë Lawrence’s ‘second’. She had all the research team members looking for leads on the location of former Cerberus assassin Douglas Walker, the man everyone in Atlas believed had been the catalyst for the all-out attempts to kill four well respected human leaders at the dedication of the twice-repaired Alliance Defense Committee headquarters building. After being picked up at the general passenger spaceport, he had checked in with a plainly distracted Jana, then borrowed a speeder for some sight-seeing just to clear his head; he had decided to stop at this pub for a bit of liquid refreshment.

He socked back the rest of his pint, settled his bill, then left the pub. Glancing up at the western sky,
he could see the brilliant orange and golds of the mid-autumn sunset; the atmosphere planet-wide was still laden with dust and heavy particles from all the destruction wrought by the Reapers, causing him to wonder if it would ever be clear again as he entered his X3M. Setting the autopilot for Atlas headquarters, he engaged the drive core and sat back to enjoy the scenery.

Tomorrow was going to be a difficult day. It had taken him ten full months of soul searching to reach the decision to leave his former life in New Cousteau for a new and uncertain future in Vancouver. It was only the third time in over thirty years of colony life he had been off Trident. He could only hope he hadn't made a huge mistake by forsaking his former home.
It was during Shepard’s discussions with Liara concerning her plan to officially become a citizen of the Asari Republics that a germ of an idea had begun to grow in the Spectre’s mind. Now that the trade talks were over and the Walker situation was settled, she had time to sit back and think on it. She was well aware that a great number of the agents employed by the Shadow Broker had become unfortunate casualties during the Reaper War; nowhere – with the possible exception of the Turian Hierarchy – were their vastly reduced numbers more noticeable than within the Alliance territories, particularly on humanity’s homeworld of Earth.

During their rushed – and painfully futile – attempt to accurately evaluate the potential for violence by each of the fifty or so radical individuals that rose to the top of Shepard and Liara’s master list, Riana and Liara had each complained about the lack of resources that could be recruited for assistance in the exacting, eye-watering effort. Thinking back, Samantha recalled with total clarity that Zoë Lawrence had asked her if she honestly believed Lady T’Soni was the only accomplished info broker in the galaxy. *I have to give credit where credit is due… Atlas somehow learned that Douglas Walker had agreed to take the contract on the Human councilor’s life.*

During that same conversation, Lawrence had also confessed to being fully aware of Liara’s prowess as a superbly effective information broker. But, while Liara’s meteoric rise as a broker was well known within the intelligence field, the Spectre did not believe that Zoë – and by extension, Atlas – was aware the Asari had, in point of fact, risen so far as to take over the entire network and become *The* Shadow Broker.

*I wonder what it would take to recruit them as legitimate agents – not for the Broker network, necessarily, but my own… to help me keep tabs on what’s happening on Earth?* Shepard
immediately paused to ask herself aloud, “Gods! Am I seriously considering this?” She huffed out a single, short laugh and grinned. Shaking her head, she added, “Yup… and now I’m talking to myself. I must be absolutely nuts.”

Chuckling at herself, she decided to take an early lunch in order to ponder all the ramifications of her position before presenting her idea to Liara. Even though only family and close acquaintances know it, she’s still the Shadow Broker… but, aboard the Knight Shade, she’s my XO… and Riana is the face of info ops. Speaking aloud once more, she added, “Shit. That could be a problem.”

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Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 13 Oct 2188

Arriving a few minutes early for his appointment with Jana Cantrell, Sheldon Webster sat in an uncomfortable chair in the outer waiting room; feeling a bit better about what he intended to do, he linked in to the intra-office network and checked the messages from his former home. As he was glancing through the several messages received from Cassie Meyers, the door to Cantrell’s office silently slid open. The change in lighting due to the open door caused Sheldon to look up; he instantly closed his omnitool and stood at the sight of the tall, full-figured woman standing in the doorway.

Gold-flecked brown eyes looked at him appraisingly as he nervously reached out a hand in greeting. “Ms Cantrell? Good morning. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me…”

Jana grasped his hand, pumped it once and responded, “Good morning, Mr Webster. She turned and casually waved towards a chair beside a medium-sized desk. “Come in, have a seat. Would you care for some coffee? Tea?”

“A cup of coffee sounds really nice.” Sheldon looked around the tidy room as he eased himself into the indicated chair. Jana turned to a side table to pour a cup of coffee for herself and one for her guest. “Cream? Sweetener?”

“Just black will be fine, Ms Cantrell.”

As she stepped behind her desk, she placed a steaming mug of the beverage in front of him; taking a sip from her own mug, she smiled as she sat in her chair and said, “Call me Jana, Mr Webster.”

Holding her mug with both hands, she took another sip of coffee; gazing at him past the rim of her mug, she inquired, “I understand you’ve resigned from Atlas… and now you’ve relocated here?

“I resigned on the first of June, and I’ve left New Cousteau for good, Jana. During the first half of the year, I was doing my best to recruit new members, but gradually turned that task over to my second, Cassie Meyers. Long story short, after LEAP’s assaults on our members and their families on Christmas day, I lost the last bit of joy I possessed at living in the colony.”

Jana’s expression didn’t change as she asked, “Last bit of joy, Mr Webster? Would you mind explaining – what changed for you before LEAP’s attacks?”

Fixing his gaze on some point beyond her right shoulder, Sheldon sipped his coffee and said in a pained voice, “It has been nearly five years since Yvonne – my wife – died in a great deal of pain… pain that no one should have to endure.” Sheldon shifted his gaze to Jana’s eyes for a moment before continuing. “Her death from ovarian cancer virtually ripped every last gram of happiness from my existence. After her death, the only thing I had to keep me sane was my work – in Cerberus… then Atlas – until last Christmas.”
Still staring into the distance, he continued in a voice of inestimable sadness. “In addition to myself, only eight other team members – of a total membership of 78 – escaped LEAP’s homicidal rampage. But those 69 that were slaughtered were not all of the casualties; most of those murdered agents had families… wives, husbands, young children. Just like me, none of them were soldiers… not that it mattered to LEAP… it was guilt by association… a wholesale bloodbath. 174 other people were butchered by those murderous bastards, plus a number of innocent civilians that were simply in the wrong place at the wrong damned time… some were Salarians… even a few Hanar.” He trailed off as he thought back to what should have been a joyous holiday.

When he finally returned his gaze to Jana, there was an unpleasant edge to his voice. “Atlas started a war with LEAP, and from my perspective, we lost it all on Christmas day. It took a few months for me to finally realize I simply couldn’t continue to live my life as if nothing bad had happened. I failed my team, Jana… my people… my colony. I had lost confidence in myself as their leader, enough so I felt I could no longer continue. I tried… God knows, I really tried. In the end, it was simply too much to bear. I had to step down… had to leave Atlas, before it ate me from the inside out.”

“But even that was not enough. I ultimately realized I could no longer continue living in New Cousteau as if everything was still the same… there were too damned many daily reminders of what had happened. So, I decided to leave Trident… make a fresh start. I had taken a position with a sky car dealer in New Cousteau. The company was kind enough to grant my request for a transfer… allowed me to relocate here. New profession on a different planet, a … a fresh start.”

Even though Jana spoke quietly, her voice was edged in steel. “I’m well aware of the casualties on Trident, Sheldon.” Cupping her elbows in her hands, she leaned back and asked, “Do you think Zoë Lawrence failed our people, Mr Webster? Thousands of our members died on Christmas Day, galaxy-wide. The numbers…” Jana had a great deal of sympathy for what Webster had gone through… was still going through. She paused, closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. “You were responsible for just one cell, Mr Webster… whereas Zoë and I were… and still are… responsible for them all.” She paused again. When she opened her eyes, her scowl of self-condemnation only served to accentuate the dangerous edge her voice had picked up as she continued, “The numbers were on a scale totally unprecedented in peacetime; LEAP completely exceeded all bounds of common decency. We believe the collateral damage – all those innocent people’s lives – was not honestly collateral. It was a means to an end; LEAP wanted to send a message so clear, one would have to be blind to miss its meaning. So, we are not quitting, Mr Webster. Zoë and I… the rest of the team here… are determined to make sure such a wholesale slaughter… on such an enormous scale… never, ever happens again.”

Her voice shifted in tone; it was suddenly cool and collected as she casually asked, “Your mind is made up? You have truly left New Cousteau… left Atlas behind? We could really use your experience to help us rebuild and train the new recruits.”

Sitting this close to her, her eyes boring into him with a laser-sharp focus, he suddenly found he had a difficult time swallowing. Unable to tear his eyes away from hers, he breathed, “No, Ms Cantrell. I am settling here, in Vancouver, for the foreseeable future… but returning to Atlas is out of the question.” Shaking his head slightly, he continued, “I remember Zoë’s speech from when she took over Cerberus to create Atlas, and I certainly won’t forget the examples she and Stafford made of Lyle Bradshaw and Wendell Coffey in New York, so… you may rest assured I’ll not be joining any of the other xenophobes running around out there. It’s just… I find myself no longer capable of continuing down the path Atlas has chosen.”

After pausing to finish the coffee in his mug, he continued, “I’m a good supervisor… and a good organizer. I have an excellent position… one with a lot of potential for advancement, especially
considering the scarcity of qualified workers system-wide. I’ll be fine… or as fine as I can be. Just as I’ll never get over the loss of Yvonne, I don’t think I will ever be able to put the loss of most of my team behind me. It just took…” Sheldon took a deep, shuddering breath before continuing, “…it took a very large bite out of my soul. There’s nothing left for me in Atlas.”

The corners of Jana’s mouth tipped up ever so slightly as she stood and moved to stand beside him. “Mr Webster…” She tentatively placed an open hand on top of his shoulder. “…Sheldon. I will not ask you to reconsider, but I do want you to know I believe Atlas has been diminished even more by your departure. I am sorry to lose you… and Zoë will feel the same.” The gold-flecked brown eyes seemed to look straight into his soul. Tightening her grip on his shoulder, she sighed, “I truly wish you well, Sir.” Dropping her hand, she returned to her chair and said, “Now, if there is nothing else, I really must get back to work. Thank you for your time.”

Sheldon stood, saying, “Thank you for the coffee, and thanks for your time, Ms Cantrell.” He then turned and quickly left her office, thinking about what she had said… determined to make sure such a wholesale slaughter never happens again… and felt as if a clawed hand had momentarily gripped his heart. He shuddered slightly as he moved down the passageway; it wasn’t what she had said so much as the way she had said it. Jessica Mikhailovich had certainly not lived to enjoy the new year, he thought as he left the building to step out into the bright sunshine of a cool, fall day. Entering his X3M, he sat inside for a number of minutes after closing the canopy. Perhaps I should go visit Zoë while she’s in the hospital, came the thought.

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Knight Shade, Palaven, Trebia – 13 Oct 2188

Liara raised a brow marking and smirked as she stared in amazement at her siame; as for Riana, the disbelief in her expression was paired with her utter mistrust of the woman her captain was planning to approach as soon as the trade talks wrapped up – which was likely happening in the imminent future. “Goddess! If this idea had been spawned by anyone else, I would have to seriously question their sanity, Nara.”

Liara’s warning glance at her First wasn’t lost on Shepard as she spoke softly. “Riana, I realize you believe the woman now known as Zoë Lawrence is merely a clever disguise for Maya Brooks, and I will not attempt to change your mind. You’ve heard my reasons for extending my trust, and while I would rather have you embrace the idea that having her and Atlas working with us could prove beneficial, I cannot make you like her… or her organization.” Shepard sighed heavily before continuing, “There’s more than enough conflict in the galaxy, Riana, and it seems to be increasing by the day. While it is true that Atlas rose from the ruins of an Illusive Man-led Cerberus, they have unwaveringly supported me… supported us… from behind the scenes, even before the start of the Victory Tour.”

Riana wasn’t ready to concede, despite the absolute love and respect she held for her captain. “Does your plan include revealing the truth to her about how LEAP was employed against them?”

Liara answered the question before Samantha could respond, her tone carrying a warning edge as she replied, “There is no point in revealing our role in providing data to LEAP; that was Shadow Broker business… which must be held separate and apart from Atlas, even if they do become Spectre assets. While Shepard and I may combine our efforts because of our relationship, it is essential my role as Shadow Broker be kept secret from Zoë Lawrence and Atlas.” The Broker paused and shrugged lightly, a frown appearing on her face as she admitted, “Despite being sickened by the absolute depravity of LEAP’s attacks on Atlas members and the collateral deaths resulting from their assaults on Christmas day, given the situation at the time, I would do the same again.”
Shepard reached out and took the hand of her *Ioniún Álainn*, sending loving reassurance through the link before addressing Liara’s First. “We already know that Lawrence – along with many other people – is more than aware that Liara is an info broker. The arrangement I’ll be proposing is strictly for my benefit as a Spectre, Riana. Atlas has an effective data-mining network and I can see no reason why we shouldn’t employ that to our advantage going forward.”

“I do not like it, *Nara*. The thought of having to work with that woman…”

Riana didn’t have the chance to finish her thought before Shepard quietly said, “She’s the leader of Atlas, Riana… a director of their operations galaxy-wide. As such, I don’t believe she is directly involved in searching for data…”

“Except when the data they uncover could lead to someone like Jessica Mikhailovich,” Riana huffed. “At that point, she does not hesitate to take matters into her own hands. She is a brutally efficient killer, Shepard. She’s changed her appearance and her name, but her skills are every bit as sharp as the blades she has employed in the past. I am sorry, but I cannot bring myself to trust her.”

Liara’s eyes narrowed slightly in reproach as she addressed her First. “I regret that you seem unable to move past your dislike for the woman, Riana, but I unreservedly trust Samantha’s instincts regarding Zoë Lawrence. You have to realize it was Zoë’s strength of will that transformed the leaderless remnants of Cerberus into an organization completely opposed to the xenophobic ideals of Jack Harper … including the likes of LEAP, which is where most of the former Cerberus members not wishing to follow Zoë’s leadership fled.”

Riana’s scowl lessened, but never fully disappeared, as she split her attention between Shepard and Liara; finally giving Liara her undivided attention, she said, “My vow as your First dictates I obey you and, as your First, I will continue to do so… unreservedly. But, I will need to meditate on everything we have discussed, to decide exactly how I need to approach this in order to overcome my own mistrust and bias against the woman.”

Turning her gaze to Shepard, Riana added, “You have my sincere apologies for my lack of faith, *Nara*. That you believe Zoë Lawrence worthy of forgiveness for her past deeds as Maya Brooks seems like a mistake in judgement, but you have proven me wrong before. Please know that whatever course you take, I promise to push my feelings aside and make an honest attempt to work with her group.”

Shepard smiled at the commando. “That’s all I can ask, Riana. Your loyalty to Liara and myself has always been beyond reproach.” Placing a hand on her shoulder, Shepard concluded, “I am sure it will work out… for all of us.”

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It had been a long day and the knowledge that Shepard intended to offer Zoë Lawrence a legitimate avenue for redemption, in addition to her normal afternoon workload, had made Riana cranky and tired. She eased herself into the compartment she shared with Samantha Traynor; noticing her *Breá Ber’ah* was already asleep, she silently shed her leathers and under armor mesh. *No use in disturbing her when I’m feeling so out of sorts.* She made use of the small bathroom to splash water in her face after relieving her bladder, then turned all the lights down and slid into their bed. Reaching over Sammi to embrace her, Riana was surprised by a possessive hand grabbing her forearm. “Sammi…” she whispered tiredly. “I did not mean to wake you. Have you been sleeping long?”

The chuckle she received gladdened her heart. “I was only dozing, Ri. You know I do not sleep well anymore, unless you are cuddled up next to me; I’ve become very accustomed to your presence.
and miss it when you are not here.” Sam rolled over to face her amanita and reached up with both hands to cup her face. “You are carrying a great deal of stress, my love; I can feel it in your body.” She placed a soft kiss on receptive lips, then used a hand to gently massage Riana’s shoulders and neck – being careful to avoid dipping her fingertips into the sensitive folds below her neck – while using the other hand to massage a breast.

Riana responded with a slight groan of pleasure before saying, “It’s usually me easing your stress, my love.” She groaned again, then admitted, “The captain was discussing our future as a Spectre team and her chosen path is one I never could have anticipated. Despite my assurances to her, I still am not sure I will be able to do what she wants of me.”

Both hands stopped their movements, though each remained where they were on Riana’s body. “What do you mean? What the Hell, Ri? You’re not leaving me… not leaving the ship, are you?”

The commando laughed as she hugged Traynor tightly to her. “Nothing like that, Sammi. The captain is simply contemplating an alliance with…” Riana paused, still finding it difficult to accept Shepard’s judgement. “…an alliance with Zoë Lawrence and Atlas.”

Sammi let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, then lovingly kissed the blue nose in front of her. “No need to say any more, Ri. I know how much you dislike that woman… because of that, she’s on my list of least favorite people as well.” She kissed the nose again, then kissed both eyelids, just because she could. “I expect you won’t sleep at all tonight unless you meld with me. Come on…”

During the months Riana had been sleeping with the Human, their mutual love for each other had grown to a point that slipping into Sammi’s mind had nearly become second nature. With warm lips on a cool forehead, she stretched her thoughts out to touch the mind of her lover. {Sammi… I really don’t know what good this will do.}

{You are stressed about the possibility of working with Zoë Lawrence… but it is no different than what you just did with that Jana woman. So, they perform data searches for us. It’s not like she’ll be traveling on the Knight Shade. You likely won’t even have to communicate with her directly.}

Riana’s thoughts were chaotic, tumbling around to the point that Sammi said aloud, “Ri! Enough!” Having regained her lover’s attention, Samantha returned her thoughts to their meld. {You are a professional, Riana. There is absolutely no reason you cannot work with Atlas when it is necessary to further our goals. I truly doubt you will ever have to speak with Lawrence, but if you do? So what? You do not have to be friends with her, even though I believe she could use a friend or two.}

{Sammi! It seems as if you are taking her side in this.}

{Riana, I love you with all that I am… You must know your name will be on my lips as I take my last breath in this life. That will never change, my darling. But, I want you to look at Zoë Lawrence from a different perspective.}

{I’m not sure I can… or even wish to do so. You saw what she did after LEAP’s Christmas day slaughter. She casually pushed a knife into the beating heart of another Human, and that was only her most recent sin.}

{Yes… a Human who conspired to leave Shepard behind after the destruction of the original Normandy; then conspired to kill Shepard and Liara on multiple occasions. I’m sorry, but Jessica Mikhailovich deserved every bit of that blade through her heart! I would have done the same, given the chance, so do not judge her so harshly… unless you also wish to condemn me!}
Tears seeped past Samantha’s closed eyelids at the memories she was sharing with her lover through their meld. [Have you looked at Maya’s history? Her life was total shit, Riana! The only home she ever had was with Cerberus and Jack Harper. He gave her purpose... just like Lady Benezia did for you. And I was much the same... growing up on a poor colony world? I had nothing. The other kids were cruel; they taunted and teased me because I was so smart... teacher’s pet, they called me. I had no friends my own age... no one but my parents and my own company. Then, the offer from the Alliance changed everything for me... so, as much as I dislike Maya Brooks, I have to respect Zoë Lawrence for the effort she is making to change herself... to be a better person and do the right thing.]

Sammi felt Riana slowly pull away from her mind. The Asari’s arms about her tightened slightly in an effort to comfort her. “I never knew, Sammi. I am so sorry for you. I forget that Humans, unlike Asari, are always alone, even when they’re in loving relationships with other Humans.” Riana kissed Sammi with a newly discovered passion. Continuing to speak in a whisper, she said, “I never join with you that I don’t learn something new, Breá Ber’ah. I love you with all of my heart, and that will never change... the Goddess sent you to ease my own sadness concerning Ryati. Perhaps...” Riana paused for several moments as she gazed into Sammi’s soft brown eyes, nearly black in the dim light of their room. “Perhaps, in time, I can learn to see what you and Shepard see in Zoë Lawrence. In the morning, I will tell Shepard and Lady Liara of our discussion... and inform them I will do my best to make this new partnership with Atlas work.”

Traynor pressed her lips to those of the Asari; pulling back, she whispered, “That’s all I ask... just that you give Atlas a chance, Ri. I have always believed Shepard’s decisions were made with a great deal of thought... and she seems to have a talent for always making them work out for the best.”

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Knight Shade, Palaven, Trebia – 14 Oct 2188

Riana, accompanied by Samantha Traynor, sought out Lady T’Soni and her captain in the crew’s mess for breakfast; after each had loaded a tray with fruits, uloth, breads and a mug of Kaffe, the pair took a seat across the table from them. Shepard nodded at Sammi before greeting Riana with a smile. “I see you brought along your ai’a me for backup, Riana. Am I going to have to fight both of you at once?” Seeing the horrified expression on Traynor’s face, she quickly added, “I’m joking, Specialist. Relax, please.” Returning her attention to the commando, she said, “May I presume you came to a decision during the night?”

Riana gently squeezed the top of Sammi’s thigh under the table as she smiled softly at her. Her expression became somber as she turned back to face her captain. “I have, Nara. Whatever agreement you come to with Atlas... with this Ms Lawrence... will most likely make my job easier.” Traynor gripped the blue hand resting atop her thigh, causing the Asari to quickly glance over before adding, “So, I will attempt to work with them, Shepard.” She dipped her head in momentary embarrassment before looking back up and adding, “Also... I wish to accompany you to the meeting with her. I want to... no, I need to be there, in person, when you extend the invitation for Atlas to join our team... to make sure I can overcome my incessant desire to see justice done for all her victims.”

“What kind of justice are you speaking of, Riana?” Liara’s eyes darted over to meet Shepard’s for only an instant before refocusing on her First. [I am not yet convinced this is going to work, Siame.]

Riana’s face was a grim mask. “I hope I do not disappoint you, nor myself, with a loss of control, but you must understand that I will neither like nor forgive her for what she has done. Maya Brooks
is a killer and this… agreement… lets her escape punishment for her crimes. Zoë Lawrence simply feeling sorry for what she did as Maya Brooks and her other previous aliases is not enough for me. It never will be.” As she finished, she removed her hand from Traynor’s leg and crossed her arms, her exterior posture reflecting her inner intransigence on the issue.

“Understood, Riana,” Shepard sighed. “We’ll set it up where you will work only with your counterpart, Jana Cantrell. Any direct contact with Zoë Lawrence will be handled by either Liara or me. Would that be satisfactory?”

“Let me be forthright; I would not cry over Maya’s death by a fellow assassin… or by any other means. As far as I am concerned, such an event would be justice, long delayed, but finally done.” Riana shrugged and forced a small smile on her face. “Satisfactory would be seeing her spaced, Nara… but, that said, I believe I can work within your parameters and avoid attempting to hasten that event by my own hand.”

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Knight Shade, Trebia, At Large – 15 Oct 2188

Shepard sighed in relief as a feeling of long-overdue liberation swept over her with the news; after more than two weeks of her crew sitting around doing next to nothing, the Human-Turian trade agreement was finally in the process of being signed. As the appropriate historical vids were being transferred to data storage devices so they could be delivered to the Council Archives, Shepard and Liara got to the business of saying a few quick farewells, first to Hannah Shepard and then to Garrus and the Primarch, before heading back to the docks to board the Knight Shade. Thankfully, she and her crew would soon be escorting Osoba back to the CGC and getting back to being a true Spectre again, instead of a glorified security detail.

There was a lot yet to be done, both in the way of establishing the hoped-for alliance with Atlas and continuing the hunt for those involved in the assassinations. If Atlas came on board, the Spectre crew would be able to focus on any who may have slipped away from Sol. Feeling the wave of disgust that accompanied that thought through the link, Liara glanced across the Bridge at the back of her bondmate, who stood at the starboard viewport as she stared, unseeing, over the city of Palaven.

{We will find them, Samantha. I don’t care how long it takes, but we will make them pay for their treachery, I swear it.}

Unaware she had been broadcasting, the Spectre turned and flashed an appreciative – and somewhat apologetic – smile in the Asari’s direction, just as the voice of Osoba’s Aide de Camp squawked across her private channel. “We’re entering the docking area now, Shepard… be there in a few minutes.”

“Understood, Riley.” Still looking at Liara, Shepard’s demeanor shifted from irritation to relief as she commanded, “Osoba and Emerson are on their way. Prep for departure, please.”

Hearing Shepard’s silent follow-on of ‘Thank the Gods,’ Liara quickly answered with a grin. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

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Once the ship had left Palaven’s atmosphere, shifted to FTL, and was enroute to the relay, Shepard retreated from the Bridge to meet Osoba in the lounge … at the Councilor’s request. Osoba stood and smiled as the Spectre entered the compartment. “Shepard. I want to thank you for the amazing patience and restraint you demonstrated during the trade talks. I know you must be absolutely exasperated, not being able to pursue the escaped assassins.”
“Actually, Sir, we already have Douglas Walker… your attempted assassin… in custody. Now, we are pursuing that proof you demanded before I take down Charles Saracino… and take him down, I will,” Shepard growled. “That bastard’s dirty, and we’re tracing the money trail to prove it to you.”

“How in Hell…” Osoba’s eyes were wide in disbelief, but he paused and collected himself in order to continue, “Of course. Sharon Culver and her Special Operations teams. She’s very good at what she does, isn’t she?”

“The best there is, Sir,” Shepard smirked. “She had a tail on Walker the instant he left the NorthAm Bank building. Her team tracked him and had him in custody before twenty-four hours had elapsed.” She chuckled and continued, “He wasn’t quite ready to be spaced for the sake of those who hired him and started talking as soon as he was able. And, while he’ll be put away for life, under rather favorable conditions considering what he tried to do, I most certainly won’t provide the same generous offer for those in charge… those funding the contracts resulting in the four attacks.”

“Damn it, Shepard. You are bound and determined to turn Earth’s political scene on its head, aren’t you?” Osoba shook his head with a sigh. “Well, you may have to relinquish your need for vengeance to Colonel Culver; she seems quite capable of following this up and doing what you want done. I have other plans for you.”

The muscles in Shepard’s jaw flexed for a brief moment as she clamped her teeth together before responding, “And just what that might be, Sir?”

“I have informed the Primarch that you’ll be assigned to Palaven as the Military Liaison for Earth…”

“No, Sir… I won’t.” The councilor didn’t get any farther in his explanation before Shepard cut him off. “If it has somehow slipped your mind, I am no longer an Alliance officer. I resigned my commission and have absolutely no intention of taking a new one, no matter what rank either Prime Minister Leiker or Admiral Lindholm is willing to offer me.” She huffed at the expression of indignation on Osoba’s face and continued, “Besides which, Spectres settle disputes between governments, we do not act as peacetime liaisons; that job belongs to Ambassador Hoffman, who is more than up to the task. I suppose it could also fall under Admiral Shepard’s purview as the Alliance Interspecies Liaison. I have no intention of stepping on either one’s toes, especially when it feels as if you’re simply trying to keep me busy… in a pathetic attempt to keep me off of Saracino’s ass for some reason.”

Bristling in anger at the veiled accusation, Osoba grumbled, “You’re still Humanity’s lead Spectre… and, as your Council representative, you’ll do whatever task I assign you!”

Shepard scowled at the man. “I am a Spectre first, Human second… and I refuse to be called upon as a personal Human lackey!” She huffed at his shocked expression and continued, “In the middle of the war, I helped you with information on your son when no one else gave a shit. Then, I saved your damned life by stepping in front of a laser designator, with absolutely no idea what kind of ammo was coming in. Did you stop to consider that, if it had been an armor piercing round, I likely wouldn’t be standing here right now?” She shook her head in disbelief and hugged before she finished, “Not once have I hesitated to assist you… and while I never take on tasks with the intent to curry favor, I would still think you owe me at least some modicum of professional courtesy to let me do my damned job!”

“But… I thought you would enjoy working with your former colleagues.” Osoba looked confused at Shepard’s response. “Aren’t you and Vakarian friends? Wouldn’t you enjoy some downtime to relax? Spend some time with him when you’re not fighting for your lives?”

“Not when there are assassins running around trying to destroy everything we’ve been working
toward the past five years! Both Hackett and Trost are dead… and I intend to find and punish those responsible!” Shepard huffed in disgust before continuing, “This is what I do, Councilor! It’s who I am! I’m not going to simply sit on my ass drinking at the bar with Garrus until every one of those assholes is either locked away… or dead.” Shepard’s lip curled up into a sneer. “You also need to know that while you were sequestered away in negotiations over the past couple of weeks, a few things happened that you should probably be made aware of… but our little chat is over and I’m going to let Councilor Tevos explain what’s going on.”

She drew a deep breath and caged her simmering fury to add, “In the meantime, it would serve you well to remember you’re currently standing on the deck of the Knight Shade… my personal ship, aboard which I am Captain… so, sit down and enjoy your short flight; I’ll have you at the CGC soon enough for your conversation with the Asari councilor.”

Center for Galactic Cooperation, Widow System, Serpent Nebula – 15 Oct 2188

After the warning call from Shepard, Councilor Tevos was standing at the docks when the Knight Shade settled into her docking cradle. Shepard quickly ushered a somewhat perturbed Osoba and his aide out through the hatch, while she chose to remain safely aboard ship; it wasn’t that Shepard was hiding, she was simply afraid she would say something else she probably shouldn’t, so wanted nothing more to do with the ungrateful Human councilor at the moment.

Liara slid up quietly behind her and whispered, “That trip certainly could have gone smoother… but I do believe you are in extremely good hands with Councilor Tevos championing your cause. Shall we head to our apartment or do you have other pending business?” As if on cue, Shepard’s omnitool buzzed with an incoming message. Seeing a fellow Spectre ident code, she answered the call.

“Spectre Shepard. My name is Moises T’Dura and, as you have undoubtedly observed, I am an Asari Spectre. I was wondering if, perhaps, you and the Lady Liara would be able to take some time to meet with me to discuss a rather sensitive issue?”

The couple looked at one another, communicating with simple thought, and Shepard answered easily, “Certainly. Based on your timing, I assume you know we just docked. If it’s acceptable, I can send you our address here on the CGC, and you are welcome to come to our home for dinner, say… 1800 hours? That would give us some time to get changed and settle in a bit.”

“That is a very generous offer, seeing as you have just returned from what must have been a very boring two-week assignment.” T’Dura’s eyes shifted between the pair, since both were visible in the omnitool pick-up. “Are you sure it is not an inconvenience?”

“Absolutely,” answered Liara. “It will be our pleasure to host.”

“Excellent.” T’Dura dipped her head in respect. “I would be happy to bring something; desert… or a bottle of something?”

“Only if you feel compelled,” Shepard chuckled. “We haven’t spent much time here, so are pretty well stocked, but bring your favorite. There’s no guarantee we’ll have whatever that is.”

“I can do that… and I will see you at 1800.” T’Dura smiled and vanished from the display as she ended the call.

“So… I have to wonder what this is all about.” Shepard turned a curious gaze on Liara, who shrugged in response.
“I have no idea… though she did refer to me as Lady Liara, and not Dr T’Soni.” Liara paused thoughtfully before continuing, “That tells me it is Thessian, and not necessarily council, business. I must admit, it does make me curious.”

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough.” Shepard smiled and wrapped an arm around her Ionúin Álainn. “Shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For those interested, Ch 1 of the Character Reference has been updated to include the personnel changes over the past few chapters.
“Thank you for allowing me to infringe upon your time on such short notice, Lady T’Soni.” T’Dura dipped her head briefly in Liara’s direction. “Business first?”

Shepard smiled softly as she and Liara led the way to the den, jokingly replying, “Only if it won’t put us off our appetites.”

T’Dura’s steps faltered and she slowed to a stop, causing her hostesses to stop and turn about to face her as Moises stated, “I am afraid I cannot necessarily promise that.”

Liara drew a deep breath before responded, “Well, then. We definitely need to sit down and have a drink as we discuss whatever brings you here.” Glancing at Shepard, she continued, “Let us get the unpleasantness out of the way so we can enjoy dinner.” Looking back at T’Dura, she very matter-of-factly stated, “We’ve survived the Reaper War. Compared to that, every other ill pales by comparison. I am confident whatever concerns you are bringing to us will not upset us nearly as much as you fear.”

T’Dura nodded in acceptance as she replied, “I certainly hope so, Lady T’Soni.”

They had entered the den and, as Shepard walked around behind the bar, Moises handed over a bottle of *Akantha*. Looking at it, the Spectre grinned. “Ahhh, *Akantha*. Nice. If this is your favorite, perhaps I need to introduce you to an Earth drink called Bushmills. It’s an Irish whiskey that also has a smooth, somewhat sweet aftertaste… so we’ll have this now and save the Bushmills as an after-dinner drink, I think.”

“Whatever you think is best, Shepard.” She turned away to sit down with Liara at the table. Once the drinks were poured and the captain joined them, she accepted the offered tumbler, took a slow sip, and began to explain the purpose behind her visit. Both Shepard and Liara listened with amazement to T’Dura’s tale; they had received notification of some of the arrests but had no idea as to the extensiveness of Spectre T’Dura’s sweep. When she was done, Shepard looked at her and couldn’t help but comment, “We received the news flashes… but either missed a few or simply lost count. Seriously? You arrested eight matriarchs in just over a month? Aren’t you a bit worried about pissing off the wrong people?”

Before T’Dura could answer, Liara added on, “More importantly, what does this all have to do with your visit here?” Liara stared intently at the Asari Spectre as she asked her question and then stated, “I do not remember any leaders within the Republic of Armali being on your list of those arrested. I certainly hope you are not here to ask me to surrender to you, as I had absolutely no knowledge of
the Serrice beacon.” She shook her head in denial as memories of that search wormed their way into her mind. “It would have made things much easier if I had.”

“You may rest easy on that account, Lady T’Soni. I have already decided that neither you nor Matriarch Mozia had any knowledge of the beacon’s location, specifically for that very reason.” She paused, took another sip of her Akantha, and continued, “However, Governess Niana has no such defense…”

“So, why the visit? Where do we enter into that equation?” She paused only briefly as her eyes darted to Shepard and back. “Or are you here to ask our assistance, thinking our current status could be of some assistance with a peaceful arrest?”

“I would never ask such a thing of you, Lady Liara… but, I am sure you, as the leader of House T’Soni, have certain liaisons within Armali. As such, in the event you happened to have any specific association with Niana, I wanted to give you the professional courtesy of forewarning, before I went and stirred up trouble at the government offices.”

Liara’s brow markings rose with T’Dura’s announcement. “And why would you do that? Have you treated ranking houses of the other republics with the same care?”

“I willingly admit that I have not. As a fellow Spectre, I simply decided it was most expedient to approach Captain Shepard and yourself before making any potentially… irreversible… moves within your home Republic.” T’Dura shrugged. “Most of those who broke the disclosure law were from remote republics without any standout influential families. And Serrice was an exception, because assistance was requested by the Captain of the Guard. I have no such invitation into Armali.”

Her eyes shifted to Shepard as she continued, “You successfully carried the fate of the entire galaxy on your shoulders. I would never presume to breach proper etiquette by failing to extend the respect, in the form of suitable notice, that is due such a famous and influential pair.”

“Goddess.” Liara rolled her eyes and scrubbed her fingertips across her forehead. “Is this how it’s always going to be now?”

“I imagine so,” Shepard chuckled. “At least for a few years, anyway, until people start to forget and their fascination with us wanes… and, I have to admit it feels much better than Osoba’s presumptuousness.” She reached over and captured Liara’s hand, pulling it down to her leg and trapping it against her thigh. Turning her attention back to T’Dura, she asked, “So what exactly do you need from us? Are you looking for such an invitation… or, perhaps, an introduction to House T’Soni’s real power… Matriarch Mozia? Honestly, if anyone has connections to or arrangements with Niana, it’s Mozia, not us; she’s our delegate to the Matriarchal councils…”

“That is true enough.” Liara drew a deep breath and sighed. “I cannot fault you for your actions… neither regarding House T’Soni nor the whole investigation. When the first report came to our attention, we were shocked… but quickly realized we should not have been. Hiding Prothean technology, even though we all know every race does it to some degree, is against Council law. The war certainly brought our extremely dire need to light… and there were those who continued to purposely hide its existence.”

Liara paused and Shepard finished her thought. “We had no intention of going after them; the war caused enough death on its own, without us adding to it.” Shepard shrugged as she finished, “They were scared… which is certainly something I can understand. Not everyone is a warrior, even if their own survival depends upon it; they would rather hunker down and hide, hoping someone like us comes along to save them. That’s one of the reasons we’re here, right?”
T’Dura remained silent for a long moment before answering, “Maybe so, but many of those matriarchs were commandos, once, and know that during times of extreme danger, especially when on such a large scale, there is no room for weakness or disobedience. As Spectres, we are here to keep the Council worlds safe… and I would have the soldier live, rather than give her life to save a coward.” She drank the last of her Akantha and set her glass down on the table, the clunk rather loud in the ensuing silence. “Bah. Such talk is idle chatter; ruminations of a fool with too much time to think. I am sorry if I have offended you with my words. It is rude of me to speak thus when you are being such gracious hosts.”

“Honesty is never rude… just sometimes hard to accept,” Shepard chuckled softly before continuing, “Let’s head over to the comm room and we’ll introduce you to Matriarch Mozia.”

“I honestly do not remember the Matriarch ever mentioning Niana.” As they rose from the table, Liara added, “Though, if she was purposely hiding information on the Beacon, she must have been working with my mother at some point. I imagine, had the galaxy not been ripped apart, she may have eventually approached me, given my extensive studies regarding the Protheans.”

As they left the sitting room to head to Shepard’s home office, the Captain smirked and added, “Assuming, of course, they don’t hold killing Javik against you.”

“That is not funny, Shepard.” Liara glared at her, growling, “And the only reason that happened was because you temporarily lost your mind and went in there to speak with him… alone!”

“Not my best moment… and I’m sorry, Liara; I know I shouldn’t joke about that.” Winking conspiratorially at T’Dura, Shepard continued, “Besides which, I’m glad you did it; he was an irredeemable asshole who treated you like a servant and who tried to kill me simply because I trusted a synthetic more than I trusted him.”

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**Alliance Military Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 16 Oct 2188**

Zoë Lawrence had recovered from her knife wounds – and the removal of her left kidney – to the point that sitting in an upholstered chair, placed before a window that allowed a view onto the parade grounds, had improved her mood tremendously. She was also able to have lunch in the secure cafeteria, which was where she was currently seated. She was finishing her meal as she spoke quietly with Jana Cantrell.

Jana had joined Zoë, so she’d have some companionship during her convalescence and to keep her in the loop with intel gleaned from numerous sources by Nina Delacroix and Lee Maxwell. She had finished eating and was about to leave when Zoë placed a hand on her arm. “Help me get back to my room, Jana, and sit with me for a bit. I think you’ll be intrigued by the visitors scheduled to see me.”

“Of course, Zoë.” With Jana assisting, Zoë carefully got to her feet. Placing her right arm through the crooked left arm Jana held out, she used it for additional support as they made their way the short distance to the lift. As they walked, Jana remarked, “I never would have expected to be physically assisting you to do anything, Zoë. And, just who are the visitors coming to see you?”

Zoë chuckled lightly in response before saying, “I’m told I nearly bled to death from my wounds. It stopped me in my tracks, Cantrell. I’m still having some difficulty with…” motioning with her left hand at the two of them side-by-side, “… having to hang on to you in order to keep from falling on my ass. But, all said and done, the exercise is better for me than riding in a damned hoverchair.” After a few more steps from the lift to her private room, Jana stopped and assisted Zoë into her
favorite chair. “I’ve never needed help before… always figured anyone close enough to touch me was too close. Now?” She leaned back, closed her eyes and sighed, concluding with, “I’m going to stop pushing people away, Jana… people that care about me, anyway.”

“That will certainly be a change,” came the smiling reply. “What about these mysterious visitors?”

Her eyelids snapped open, allowing dark brown eyes to scrutinize the gold-flecked brown eyes regarding her. “As my Deputy, I want you with me, Jana. Spectre Shepard is supposed to meet with me… and she’s bringing an Asari, but not Dr T’Soni. Oh, and Tim will be joining us as well.” Glancing at the wall-mounted chrono, she added, “They should all be arriving shortly.”

“Not Dr T’Soni? Who else would she bring with her?” Jana turned at the sound of approaching footsteps, and realized Zoë had no time to explain further. “Sounds like they have arrived.”

Tim Stafford moved several chairs closer to where Zoë was already sitting, arranging them in a semicircle about a small table as Shepard greeted them.

“Mr Stafford. Ms Cantrell… nice to meet you.” She motioned for Zoë to remain seated as she leaned down to take her hand. “Ms Lawrence – mind if I simply call you Zoë?”

With a tentative smile, Zoë gripped the Spectre’s hand, pumped it twice and released it, saying, “Zoë would be just fine, Captain.”

She waited expectantly as Shepard introduced her Asari companion. “This is my information operations officer, Riana Iregos.”

As Riana approached and began to extend her right hand, Zoë could see the reluctance in her body language, so did something completely unexpected. Bringing both her hands out, palms up in the traditional Asari greeting, she said, “I apologize for not standing to greet you, Vanguard Iregos. It is my pleasure to be formally introduced to you.”

After a moment’s hesitation to get over her shock, Riana gently placed her hands palms down on those of the dusky-skinned woman seated in front of her. With a forced smile, she replied flatly, “Thank you for agreeing to meet with us, Ms Lawrence.” After quickly nodding in recognition to both Jana and Tim, she stepped back to stand behind Shepard.

“Not like I really had a choice.” Zoë’s focus shifted to the Spectre as she continued, “But, believe me, I am more than happy to do so; and, I will readily admit to believing it will be on much more pleasant terms than our previous encounter outside.”

With a cautionary glance at Riana, Shepard quietly answered, “It will be, I promise you that.” Turning back to the Atlas leader, Shepard eased herself down into a chair on Zoë’s right. “I was relieved to learn you had survived your encounter with Frédéric Klein, Zoë – I do believe he would have succeeded in killing Hoffman had you not intervened – and I’m sure you count yourself lucky that his blade had not been coated with a fast-acting poison.” She shook her head and admitted, “Even so, my own injuries were nothing compared to yours; I spoke with your Doctor Stegmann on my way in. Without giving me any confidential specifics regarding your injuries or treatment, he assured me you will make a full recovery.”

“Had I known it was Frédéric Klein wearing that cloaking generator, I might have proceeded in a different manner to stop him.” She lowered her gaze to the floor as she shook her head minutely; returning her gaze to Shepard’s face, she quietly continued. “Klein always prided himself on being a
surgeon. He has intimate knowledge of peoples’ physiology, Shepard… whether Human…” Zoë glanced at Riana as she continued, “… Asari, Batarian, Turian.” She trailed off as she continued to think about the man. “Because his work was so up close and personal, Klein was acutely aware that any dagger he was wielding might be turned against him by his target, so never coated any of his blades with poison.”

A twinge of pain in her side caused a catch in her breathing, which did not go unnoticed by Shepard; the concern in her voice was apparent as she responded. “I did not realize your wounds were so severe, Zoë. Your doctor seems quite confident you will fully recover from your injuries. but I would like you to keep me informed of your progress.”

“I appreciate your concern, Shepard, but I believe my body is simply telling me I have extended my escape from that uncomfortable med bed for nearly as long as I dare.” Placing her right hand over the bandages under her robe and gown, she asked, “You needed to speak with me about something specific, Spectre?”

Looking at Riana, Shepard nodded nearly imperceptibly; the Vanguard responded by activating her omnitool and walking the edges of the room in which they were seated. Seeing this, Jana stood and followed the commando, her own omnitool alight on her wrist.

Riana’s face betrayed her slight irritation at Jana’s lack of trust until she stopped in front of the Asari and held up her omnitool, whispering, “Different frequencies, Ms Iregos. The Alliance is continuously changing their eavesdropping frequencies. I scanned just before you arrived… and these are the most recent.” Grudgingly, Riana glanced at Jana’s display and adjusted her own settings to block any active listening devices. “Thank you. That does save me a bit of time.”

Riana’s straight-lipped annoyance at Jana turned into the barest hint of a smile as she turned and nodded in Shepard’s direction. “The area is clean, Spectre.”

Shepard acknowledged this with a nod, then turned in her chair so she could face the Atlas leader without having to twist her neck. “I have some news I need to share with you; it concerns my own plans for the future, Zoë. So far, none of the Alliance news outlets have uncovered these plans, and I need to share them with you…” Shepard quickly glanced at Tim and Jana, “… Ms Cantrell and Mr Stafford, before my intentions become public knowledge; my reasons for this meeting will then become eminently clear.”

Zoë, noticing the woman’s attention had flicked momentarily to Jana and Tim, nodded in acceptance and replied softly as her mind raced through the possibilities. “Please, continue.”

“I am in the process of formalizing my legitimacy as a full-time resident… and citizen… of Thessia.” Shepard waited for Zoë’s expression of shock and disbelief to fade away before continuing. “As a legally recognized Asari citizen, I cannot hold dual citizenship, which means the end of this month will mark the official termination of my citizenship on Earth.”

Zoë sat back in her chair and carefully crossed one bare leg over the thigh of the other. Thinking about what she had just been told as she rearranged the hems of her hospital gown and robe, she finally said, “That news will have the Alliance politicians – and a fair share of Earth’s populace – rather upset, Shepard… each to their own varying degree.” Sensing the Spectre was about to protest her assessment, she quickly added with a snarky grin, “Not that their unfair and oftentimes hostile treatment of you these past several years hasn’t come around to bite the lot of them in the ass. I say good for you and your bride, Shepard!”

Shepard, while not taken aback by Zoë’s show of support, still expressed surprise. “I’m a bit shocked by your attitude. I honestly figured you would be one of my chief detractors, Zoë.”
With a sigh, Zoë replied, “It pains me to admit to not being among your supporters at the beginning of the war.” With a faint smile, she continued in a soft voice. “Of all the people in Alliance space, Shepard, you and your compatriots are probably more aware of my xenophobic background than anyone.” Noting Riana’s expression of amazed agreement, she went on to explain, “I was a top assassin for the Illusive Man for over fifteen years. Things changed for me in the middle of the damned war and I lost my conviction in the Humans-first-at-any-cost ideals espoused by Harper… Somewhere along the way, he shifted to an all or nothing gamble; if he could not end up ruling the galaxy, he was going to make damned sure no one would survive to rule in his stead. I believe it was all the Reaper-tech in him… and that he had been indoctrinated… possibly on Palaven during the First Contact war. It was a slow process to be sure, but I gradually began to see the contributions of the other races and realized just how wrong Cerberus had been… and how damned many things I had to somehow atone for.” A haunted look flickered over her features as she concluded, “I believe my first act of redemption was eliminating The Illusive Man.”

Pausing, her eyes dropped to the floor once again and she took another deep breath. Blowing it out slowly, she glanced momentarily at Jana, Tim and Riana before turning her attention back to Shepard. “You have told me your news… and I have, hopefully, explained my position. Now I’m left to wonder why you would inform me… us… of these plans in advance of the news release? Dare I presume this has something to do with me… and Atlas?”

“I think you already know, Ms Lawrence… or have guessed, at least.” Shepard smiled softly at the perceptive woman. “Ever since I met Liara, Earth hasn’t honestly been my home… and as a Spectre, I’ll need eyes and ears here, since it’s quite likely I won’t be making landfall with any sort of regularity. You mentioned once before about us working together… so, I want to take you up on your offer.” A troubled look washed over the Spectre’s face, so briefly Zoë would have missed it if she hadn’t been intently studying Shepard’s expressions. “Liara has convinced me I cannot rip a hole in the galaxy the size of Sol in order to locate… and eliminate… all of the former Cerberus agents like Douglas Walker and Frédéric Klein. So, I have a proposal for you.”

With a quick look at Riana, Shepard began, “First and foremost, I want Atlas to become a leg of my information collection network. You bragged, and rightfully so, that Atlas has an effective data mining capability… I want you to employ that ability for me. In exchange, I will grant Atlas, and any agents you assign, Spectre amnesty for missions… pre-approved missions… to target alien-hostile entities within the Sol system.” Shepard sat back in her chair and waited, as the look of skepticism on the Atlas leader’s face gradually transformed into an expression of hopeful anticipation.

Zoë looked at Jana, then Tim – both of whom nodded their approval – before returning her attention to Shepard. Clearing her throat, she said, “That is a most generous offer, Spectre. We would require some guidance… I wouldn’t want Atlas to drift outside of whatever lane you’re offering, so we need to know the rules of your proposal before I can accept.”

“You discovered Douglas Walker on your own, so just keep on doing what you’re already doing. It haunts me to think that if we had shared pertinent data between us, perhaps we would have discovered the plan to poison Prime Minister Trost, along with the identities of the other two assassins as well… including Klein.” Shepard leaned forward, and her eyes turned to green ice as she continued, “I want the people who engineered this conspiracy, Zoë. Your first assignment would be to find any of the individuals or groups who were responsible for the recent attacks.” Shepard felt her throat tighten as she thought of Admiral Hackett and she fell silent, allowing Zoë a chance to speak.

Given Jana and Tim’s reaction to the Spectre’s proposal, Zoë didn’t really need to think about the offer. “I see this as an extremely beneficial arrangement for all parties involved…” pausing, she
showed her teeth in a wolfish grin. “… except our enemies.”

“Can I take that as a yes?” Shepard canted her head slightly and raised her left brow in anticipation of an affirmative response.

“Absolutely, Spectre Shepard.”

“Excellent.” With a smile spreading across her lips, Shepard continued, “Then, I think our best way forward would be to have Riana, as my Information Operations officer, work with Ms Cantrell on our information exchange process… especially since they already have each other’s contact information. We’ll start out by exchanging all the data each of us collected prior to the ceremony, so we can crosscheck what we found and not waste time duplicating efforts already made. Also, you probably know that we already have Douglas Walker… and I am prepared to release every piece of his testimony to you. He gave us a hard link to Terra Firma as an organization, but I want to nail Saracino… and every other bastard who had anything to do with this attack… to the wall. What really chafes my ass is that there are xenophobes in the Systems Alliance military who are willing to kill our own leaders!”

Shepard didn’t get a chance to finish the thought as Tim interrupted, “One of the people I’ve met while a guest of the Alliance will be researched as soon as I return to our base, Spectre. A Marine sergeant… Diane Häberli. She leaned on me pretty hard until she finally realized I simply wasn’t going to speak to her. I got the distinct impression she wasn’t sorry to see either Trost or Hackett die out there… and that she was angry we actually managed to prevent the other two assassinations.”

“Feel free to follow that hunch to ground, Mr Stafford… but keep me apprised of your progress. If she turns out to be a Cerberus sympathizer or LEAP informant, I want her ass out of the Alliance.” Shepard’s eyes turned to ice as she added, “One way or another.”

“Understood, Spectre.” Tim gave an acknowledging nod, glad he was not the true target of her frigid glare. “I’ll let you know what I discover… and I’ll be sure to pass any potential ops up the chain for your authorization before I run them.”

“I want this to be a free exchange of information, so we can play off one another’s strengths. If there’s any type of support you need along the way, either during the search or for an approved op, be sure to ask.” Her focus returned to the leader of Atlas. “We’ll find our enemies and come up with operations plans together, Zoë. Once we agree upon a way forward, I’ll give you the go-ahead for the op and then provide the necessary top-cover for anyone who is unlucky enough to get themselves caught… a more permanent arrangement that mimics what we did here. Is that something you can work with?”

“I believe so, Spectre.” Zoë’s lips shifted to a thin grim line as she added, “Though, with the data exchange, I would like to think future joint ops will go much better than this one did.”

Shepard nodded in agreement as she stood from her chair and reached out with her right hand, which Zoë willingly took as the Spectre continued, “With that settled, we should be going so you can get your rest. Mr Stafford is now free to travel whenever and wherever he cares to… as are you, once Doctor Stegmann releases you to go home.”

Zoë held onto the woman’s hand as she slowly rose from her chair to stand in front of the Spectre. “If last month someone had told me I’d be offered a job working for a council Spectre, I would have laughed in their face. Thank you, Shepard, for trusting me… there are few enough people in this galaxy that actually do, and it really means a great deal to know that you, at least…” at which she looked pointedly at Riana, “… have some semblance of faith in me… and Atlas. We won’t let you down… I promise.” As Shepard dropped her hand and started to turn towards the door, Zoë added,
“May the gods protect you and yours.”

Council Offices, CGC, Widow System – 16 Oct 2188

After the visit from Spectre T’Dura, Shepard’s reasons for visiting Councilor Tevos in her offices the following day had doubled. Raesia simply smiled when first asked about her chat with Osoba.

“Seriously, Shepard, you have no cause for concern. After explaining your and Liara’s position regarding your desire to raise your Asari children on Thessia, as Asari citizens, the poor man really had no arguments he could make that didn’t make him sound like a completely selfish Pyjak standing in the middle of a dung heap. As for your other reason for being here, I am well aware of T’Dura’s actions… and you should realize that I am in favor of her arrests, given the extreme efforts to which I had to go to discover the location of that Prothean beacon for you.”

“Were you, just perhaps, the one to suggest she may need to contact us before taking any actions in the Armali Republic?” Shepard’s eyes twinkled as she made the query, thinking she already knew the answer.

The delicate sound of an amused laugh fell upon Shepard’s ears as the councilor responded, “Of course I was.” Tevos’ elbows sat on her desk, her fingers intertwined with her chin resting upon them, somewhat hiding the triumphant smile that sat upon her lips. “Moises is by no means a politician… and, every once in a while, she needs to be reminded to play nice with others. She is well aware of our friendship, so I am absolutely positive she knew my suggestion was much more than a casual comment made in passing.”

“Please don’t be offended, but I need to ask.” Shepard’s expression sobered just a bit as she queried, “Your suggestion was meant purely as a reminder for T’Dura, and not to give Liara and I a chance to divert her away from any potentially… compromising… discoveries?”

The question really set Tevos laughing. A hand went to her chest as she exclaimed, “Goddess, no! If anything, I wanted to provide an excuse for you all to meet, seeing as you will soon be working more directly with her, both reporting to me as your Council lead.”

Even though she felt Tevos would never do such a thing, it was still a relief to have her validate that belief so readily. “I suppose a thank you is due, then. Though I have to admit, she did seem uncharacteristically deferential toward Liara and me. Based on the reports I read, I figured her to be much more direct and uncompromising.”

“Oh, believe me… She most definitely is.” Tevos cast an expression of warning toward her newest Spectre. “Do not underestimate Spectre T’Dura based on this single interaction. My suggestion or not, she would have approached you completely differently had she not already concluded that both Liara and Matriarch Mozia are innocent regarding the beacon.”

“As she should,” Shepard shrugged. “She seems to be my kind of Spectre. I think we’re going to get along just fine.” Shepard smiled and gave Tevos a nod. “Now… back to Councilor Osoba. I assume he accepted that I’m not going to play the role of Alliance liaison for him?”

“Yes, he did… grudgingly. He was truly counting on your friendship with Garrus to make this easy.”

“My mother is perfectly capable of reaching that goal, but no matter… not as long as he’ll drop it and not become an obstacle to my becoming an Asari citizen.” Shepard suddenly smiled and continued, “So, with him not throwing up any objections, what’s next?”
Tevos opened her omnitool and transferred a file to Shepard. “This is your appointment with the Council of Governesses on Monday… the five who remain in office, anyway. Given who you are, they are fast-tracking this request; they want you as an Asari citizen, Shepard. Have no doubt they count having such an influential couple living on Thessia as a major coup.”

“Just great.” Shepard shook her head and sighed in resignation. “You do realize we’re not going to play their games if we can help it, right?”

“Yes, I do… and, I do believe, so do they.” An understanding smile crossed the councilor’s face as she added, “I think you will be pleasantly surprised by their lack of demands upon you… other than the immediate future, where they will likely query House T’Soni on their preference regarding the new Governess… to replace Niana, whom Spectre T’Dura is planning to arrest today.”

“Gods be damned.” Shepard shook her head in amazement. “She really doesn’t waste any time, does she?”

“No, she does not.” Tevos cocked her left brow, her green eyes glittering with mischief as she continued, “Reminds me of another certain Spectre I know.”

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Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 16 Oct 2188

At their early evening dinner meeting, neither Nina Delacroix nor Lee Maxwell could hide their expressions of surprise and utter astonishment upon learning of the agreement that Zoë Lawrence had entered into with Spectre Samantha Shepard. Nina had been the first to find her voice; she asked Jana for details about the meeting, particularly concerning the mysterious Asari that had accompanied Shepard. “Riana Iregos? Isn’t she the one that refused to share any info on Zoë’s condition during her initial call to us? What the Hell, Jana… does Zoë really expect us to simply roll over and give up whatever we manage to uncover? Sounds like a one-way deal to me!”

Max was mystified by this revelation. “She actually admitted…"

“Her demeanor when she was introduced to Zoë, while not overtly hostile, was less than cordial. Remember, part of my job when I worked for Jack Harper was observing, evaluating and reporting on the many people he met with personally.” A corner of her mouth ticked up as she paused at the memory of their introductions. “She actually seemed to relax ever so slightly when Zoë greeted her in the style of the Asari.” Jana demonstrated by placing her hands out, waist-high and palms up before continuing. “I believe Riana was honestly surprised that a previously xenophobic Human would know anything about interacting with an Asari, and it demonstrates to me that Zoë, despite her background as a fanatically intolerant Maya Brooks, knows a great deal more about alien cultures than she admits to those around her.”

“And this Asari actually reciprocated?”
“Her name is Riana, Max… and yes, she actually placed the palms of her hands on the upturned palms Zoë offered. It was quite obvious to me that Riana will never consider Zoë a friend, but I do believe she will be civil towards me.”

Nina said, “So, what’s our first assignment as data farmers for Spectre Shepard?”

“She seriously wants everyone responsible for engineering this conspiracy. We need to find the people or groups – any and all of them – responsible for the attacks. They have already captured Douglas Walker… and will be forwarding us a transcript of his interview with Colonel Culver.” Jana glanced at her ever present datapad as she continued, “The Spectre has a solid link to Terra Firma, but she wants Charles Saracino… and every other son of a drooling whore that had anything to do with planning the attack; I truly do not envy anyone that can be solidly connected to this, especially whomever thought killing Admiral Hackett was a stellar idea.”

Max asked softly, “Do we have a copy of the medical examiner’s report on Reuben Trost?”

“Shepard said she would have everything sent to us; I have no doubt that report will be included. Do you have a specific line of inquiry you wish to pursue?” Jana could see that Max was already thinking about what he needed to do… after a few moments, she prompted, “Lee?”

Hearing his given name jerked him from his reverie. “Yes? Umm, sorry Ms Cantrell. I was just thinking… the small snippet of a vid-file I saw appeared to show Trost in the midst of food-induced anaphylaxis.”

Lips pressed together in a straight line, Jana asked, “Anaphy…?”

“Anaphylaxis… a sudden, severe allergic reaction, likely from something in the salad, as that was the only food being served at the time. Death from asphyxiation can occur rapidly in otherwise healthy individuals. Besides needing a copy of the autopsy report, we need to know exactly what was in that salad, Ms Cantrell. If what I suspect is true, someone knew precisely what the prime minister was allergic to and used that knowledge to end his life.”

“Not just end his life, it would seem…” Jana mused aloud. “… his allergic reaction was planned as a distraction… as something that would trigger simultaneous attacks on the other three men.” Coming to a decision, she said, “Max, you work on Trost’s murder. Check with Émiléda and Melina… see if either of them knows what was in that salad. You should speak with Tim and Zoë, since they had just started eating… they may have tasted something different, something that didn’t seem to belong with the salad. I’ll also assign an assistant to help you analyze the autopsy report. Uncovering the truth concerning Trost’s death may lead us to whomever knew of his food allergy, if that was what killed him.”

Turning her attention to Nina, she said, “Ms Delacroix, I want to know how in unholy Hell Frédéric Klein has been eluding us since before we reformed Cerberus as Atlas. Was he hiding in plain sight all this time? More importantly, what kind of threat does he pose to us as a group, especially since Zoë nearly crushed his larynx… and since we know he never accepted a job without a big payday, we have to uncover his patron. Who was pulling his strings?”

Nina displayed just a hint of teeth as she smiled in anticipation. “I’ll find everything there is to know about the bastard, never fear.”
Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 17 Oct 2188

Jana exchanged pleasantries with Riana as soon as she accepted the early morning call from the *Knight Shade*. “Ms Iregos. I appreciate the call. Am I to presume this is about Douglas Walker?”

Riana’s mood was difficult to read on the monitor, but Jana could plainly see the Asari was frowning slightly… most likely at being required to contact Atlas at all. “Just so you completely understand, I am less than thrilled about this arrangement, Ms Cantrell. That said, I will do my very best to insure our joint success.”

Jana schooled her expression to remain neutral as she replied, “Understood, Ms Iregos. If I may be so bold, would you be open to addressing me by my given name? It’s Jana.”

Riana’s eyes narrowed slightly; she looked down for a few moments, obviously thinking about the request. Returning her gaze to the image before her, she replied in a quiet voice, “That would be agreeable, Ms…” she masked the slight hesitation by wiping her hand across her mouth. “Jana.” After a moment of silence, she added, “Since you wish to be referred to by your given name, I will extend the same courtesy. You may call me Riana.”

With a growing smile, Jana responded, “Thank you… Riana. Our comms are set to receive your data packet. Transmit when you are ready.” Jana looked down at her console in surprise, as it began receiving the multi-gigabyte data stream from the *Knight Shade*. Looking up, she said, “That’s an impressive amount of information, Riana. Is all of that from Colonel Culver’s interview with Douglas Walker?”

“Most of it,” she answered flatly. “There are also copies of the medical examiner’s reports for Prime Minister Trost and Admiral Hackett, along with basic investigative information on Corporal Hamilton.” At Jana’s instant look of puzzlement, the Asari allowed a smirk to seep into her expression as she clarified, “The cowardly Human that ended his own life after murdering Admiral Hackett. His cause of death is obvious, but there may be something in the detective’s report that could potentially lead you to his handler.”

When the download was complete, Jana quickly said, “Thank you, Riana. I am uploading a progress report for you. It details our own research into this conspiracy, hopefully so we are not duplicating each other’s efforts; it includes everything we’ve learned to date concerning Frédéric Klein. I plan to upload a fresh update at the end of each day until we have this issue resolved to Spectre Shepard’s satisfaction.”

An expression of approval briefly lit Riana’s features as she nodded her head slightly. “You have my thanks for your cooperation… Jana. While I have admitted to my doubts about working with your organization, please know I intend to keep an open mind going forward. Perhaps I can come to
“I know we can,” Jana replied. “We’ll get right to work on everything you’ve sent, Riana. Thank you, and good bye.” Jana cut the connection and secured the terminal after moving all the downloads into the limited-access server, so they could be retrieved by Tim, Max, Nina, Valérie or herself. Just looking at the huge amount of information Sharon Culver had learned from Douglas Walker had her mind spinning. She must have offered one Hell of a deal for him to give all that up… Shaking her head as she stood from the workstation, she left the comms compartment to go find Tim.

As Jana walked into the research area, she glanced around to locate her target before moving purposefully to the wide counter where Tim Stafford was currently working; his attention was divided between multiple monitors as he searched among a number of databases for everything concerning Alliance Marine Sergeant Diane Häberli. As Jana approached, he looked up and acknowledged her presence with a tense smile; she began speaking almost before she had stopped moving. “Tim, we’ve received the data from Spectre Shepard, and it’s a massive amount of information; I’ve stored it all in the limited-access server. While the computers are chewing on the data concerning Häberli, I’d appreciate you taking a look at the investigative reports concerning Admiral Hackett’s murderer, Corporal Owen Hamilton. There might be some kind of lead in there that tells us where to start the back-trace on that traitor.”

“Sounds good,” came the ready response. “Max stopped by with Émiléda, concerning the salad being served that day; I informed them it definitely had a different taste… it wasn’t unpleasant, just… it was something I couldn’t quite place, though I’d swear I’ve tasted it before.”

Jana nodded at Tim’s observation. “We’re almost certain something in that salad is what caused Trost’s violent reaction. While Max already has a few ideas he’s working on – and I have every confidence he’ll get to the bottom of it – if you place that taste, be sure to update him.”

Tim smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind, Jana. But, even if I don’t, if anyone can figure out what it was, Max can.” He started to say more but stopped. Jana’s expression told him she had noticed a hint of blush coloring his face, so he sighed and continued. “I was going to say it’s good to be back here with something positive to do, rather than sitting uselessly in that detention facility.”

Cantrell’s smile was grim as she replied. “It’s good to have you and the others back here, but we won’t be complete until Zoë has been released to rejoin us. Let us hope there will be no need for us to ever be separated like that again.”

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Alliance Military Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 17 Oct 2188

Webster clamped the VISITOR badge to the lapel of his shirt, then opened his omnitool to briefly study the hospital’s layout. The secure patient wing was up two levels and down a rather long passageway; he would have to pass through two security checkpoints with scanners before being admitted to the area. Sheldon was not privy to any of the details concerning the debacle that had turned the after-dedication luncheon into a scene of utter chaos, and couldn’t help but wonder if the assassin responsible for Zoë’s injuries was also in this area. He did know that two people had died but was more concerned about those still living… specifically, Zoë Lawrence.

He had been meaning to visit her sooner, immediately after his meeting with Jana the previous Monday. Don’t know why I took so long to do this. Have I become so damned unsure of myself that I hesitate to visit an injured woman in the hospital? He continued to think about this as he
As soon as he knocked on her door, the haptic interface cross-faded from orange to green; the door panel slid into its pocket as a bored-sounding voice beckoned him to enter. Discovering Zoë seated in an upholstered chair placed in front of the window, he didn’t expect that she would remember him after their brief meeting in January. Moving to stand to the side and slightly ahead of the chair, he studied the ivory colored tribal tattoos on the left side of her face as she returned his gaze. Her curious expression quickly changed to recognition as she reached out with her right hand and spoke. “Sheldon Webster… late of Atlas-New Cousteau, on Trident, I believe.”

Webster grinned as he gripped her hand – Not as weak as I would have expected, given what she’s been through – pumped it once and released it, saying, “I’m surprised you remembered me, Ms Lawrence. It’s good to see you again.”

Making a noise by blowing air past her lips, she answered, “Pfft… Jana’s been keeping me in the loop concerning everything that’s been going on, including your earlier visit.” She narrowed her eyes slightly while continuing, “I have to concur with her opinion that our group is not as robust following your resignation, Mr Webster.” Waving to the chair sitting across from a small table, she added, “Have a seat, and please, call me Zoë.”

Webster moved, sat in the comfortable chair facing her and smiled as he said, “Only if you’ll call me Sheldon.” As this was only the second time he’d been in such close proximity to her, he paused for a moment to study her face as he smiled at her, thinking, Damn! She is most attractive… exotically so! “I thought you might enjoy seeing a non-Alliance visitor. Don’t expect too many people make the effort to get in this place to see you. The security does seem a bit tight, even for an Alliance-run medical facility.”

The deep chuckle surprised him. “I was injured preventing a cloaked assassin from reaching Ambassador Hoffman,” she replied. “The brass doesn’t want anything else happening to me before I’m discharged, so I’m being accorded VIP treatment.”

“Frédéric Klein,” he said in a near whisper. “I hear that bottom feeder disappeared during the vacuum left by Jack Harper’s mysterious departure, before you took over. If you don’t mind my asking, are your injuries healing okay?”

Dark eyes clouding slightly at the memories, she placed her right hand on her left side above her hip while replying, “Two stab wounds. Destroyed a kidney, sliced my stomach open. I’ve been told I damn near bled out…” she nodded at the window, “… on their manicured grass out there.”

Sheldon nodded in sympathy. “You must have really pissed him off. How’d you get him off of you?”

“Had my thumbs buried in his larynx when Sergeant… Maddix, I think… kicked him in the head. Don’t remember much after that… I was drifting in and out. After my surgery, I learned who the assassin was. If it had been anyone else, the damned blade would have probably been coated with some fast-acting poison. Tim identified him to the sergeant who was accompanying Hoffman, and then told the sergeant who I was and asked him to get word to Spectre Shepard about us.”

“What was Shepard’s involvement in all this?”

Zoë told Sheldon how she and Tim had met the Spectre the week before the ceremony… and that Shepard had promised to not say anything that would keep herself or Tim from attending. “None of us had our omnitools, so we couldn’t even let Jana know they were holding us. Shepard sent word to Alliance brass, asking them to drop all the charges and release us… well, everyone but me. I’ll be
here for a few more days to finish recuperating; once they release me, I’ll have to avoid getting physical with anyone for a while.” Looking down at her hands, she added, “I’ll be back here in a few months to have a new kidney implanted… compliments of the Alliance for my unexpected, yet valiant, aid to Ambassador Hoffman.”

After wiping her eyes, she said, “Enough about me… what about you? You’ve left Atlas and Trident behind. Jana tells me you’re planning to stay in Vancouver? To work and live here?”

Sheldon responded, “I’m already working for Cision Motors… as a supervisor for the second shift. They have a remanufacturing center upriver from our… that is, your base. There are more than enough damaged X3M’s and X3M-C’s to keep us busy rebuilding them for a long time. Simpler and more cost effective to repair than to manufacture new ones… so far. With the economy in a shambles, people are doing well if they can afford a roof over their heads, food for their bellies and clothes to wear. Those fortunate enough to have jobs need transportation, and our re-mans cost no more than a third of new.”

Zoë nodded and smiled at his enthusiasm. “Sounds like you have a job you enjoy.” After a brief pause, she asked, “Would you mind giving me your contact information, Sheldon? Our agents have been increasingly busy these past few weeks. I’m thinking we need a few more speeders, at least, and your remanufactured X3M’s sound like they’d more than meet our needs.”

Sheldon grinned as he activated his omnitool. “There’s my work address and network ident-code.”

Zoë tapped several controls on her own interface; after filing Sheldon’s contact information, she forwarded hers to him, then shyly said, “Just because you no longer work for Atlas… Hell, especially since you’re no longer working with us, don’t become a stranger, Sheldon. You’ll be living here… let me know if you need any assistance finding your way around, or… if you’d just like to talk with someone with whom you’re already acquainted.”

Sheldon filed Zoë’s info in his omnitool, then stood to leave. “I need to get going… have to go to work. Thanks for the contact info... and, if you don’t mind, I’d like to come by to visit again before they cut you loose.”

Zoë smiled up at the man. “I’ll look forward to that, Sheldon. Thanks for coming by to see me. I enjoyed your visit.”

Sheldon nodded, then slipped past her, left her room and strolled down the hall. I enjoyed visiting her, he thought. I’ll come back in a couple of days, just to see how she’s doing. Feeling more relaxed than he had for some time, he left the Alliance base and drove to Cision Motors.

Dear resolution:

Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 17 Oct 2188

Once he finished setting up his queries regarding Sergeant Häberli, Stafford opened the file on Corporal Owen Hamilton. Tim had witnessed Hamilton blowing his brains out, so it was no surprise that his cause of death was listed as a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Given what was happening, Tim hadn’t taken the time for a close look as the corporal fell to the ground dead… but the report included the minutest of details. Tim remembered the corporal had placed the muzzle of his weapon under his chin, and the report added that the bullet had entered Hamilton’s lower jaw behind his front teeth, tore into his nasal cavity through the roof of his mouth, then exited a couple of centimeters behind his natural hairline after destroying the frontal lobes of his brain. The file also included photos; a collection of wide shots, as well as a few close-ups, were not something Stafford thought he would ever be able to ‘un-see’.
Hamilton’s weapon, an M-11 Suppressor, had been recovered and placed in an evidence locker after ballistic tests; it appeared to be Hamilton’s personal weapon, rather than the standard Alliance-issue M-5. *Must have decided he didn’t need a lot of capacity for the assignment,* Tim thought. *More accurate, quieter, high damage per round, faster rate of fire. I need to speak with his CO, if they’ll even let me back in the place.*

The corporal’s immediate supervisor had been a Marine Master Sergeant, name of Matthias Scholtz. Looking for his Alliance HQ contact information, he discovered an interesting fact. Scholtz’s office was shared by Marine Sergeant Diane Häberli. *So, had Hamilton received his assignment as Hackett’s guard from Scholtz, or from Häberli? Was my impression of Häberli accurate?* Deciding against a personal visit – *better to have Spectre Shepard pay them a visit after I do some more digging* – Tim added Scholtz’s name to the search program already running and returned to his earlier hunt for background data on Sergeant Häberli.

It was many hours later when Stafford sat back in his chair in near disbelief, vigorously dry-scrubbing his face as he attempted to wrap his mind around this latest revelation. Glancing at the wall-mounted chrono beside the door, he started at the realization he had been working nearly nonstop since Jana’s mid-morning visit, and it was now just past dinnertime. After downloading all his research notes to an OSD, he secured his personal terminal, grabbed his jacket and left to find Jana. He was texting on his way out the door. *Need to see you. Now.*

“*We have to alert Zoë, Tim! She has no idea of the danger she’s in.*” Jana had skimmed through the results of Stafford’s research with a rapidly increasing sense of dread. “*Having Klein chained to his bed won’t do her any damned good if Scholtz or Häberli can get to Zoë!*”

“Medina…” Tim murmured, before speaking up. “*Contact Corporal Medina… quietly. She’s been rock solid in Zoë’s corner ever since she was injured. If nothing else, she can stay with Zoë until either Boris or myself can get over there… provide her with some cover. Zoë’s in no shape to single-handedly take on a determined killer.*”

Jana was moving to make the call before Tim finished speaking. “*Right under our goddamned noses all the time,*” came the bitter declaration as Jana waited impatiently for Gracie to answer. The puzzled expression on Medina’s face upon accepting the call quickly became one of steely determination as Jana explained what they had discovered. “*We have an agent coming over to stay with her, Corporal. At this point, I’d feel much better if she wasn’t alone in her room.*”

Gracelyn showed her teeth in a grim, humorless smile. “I’m on it, Ms Cantrell. I’ll head over there right now.”

“*Quietly, Corporal… We still don’t know how deep this pile of excrement goes. Be careful.*” Jana disconnected and nodded to Tim. “*Go! I’ll round up Boris and Rich; along with Medina, the four of you should be able to keep Zoë covered. We’ll need to rotate our people, but I absolutely do not want her alone in her room, security be damned!*”

“Agreed. Should we call Zoë? Let her know what’s going on?”

“Secure text only, Tim. I don’t want the Alliance getting wind of what we’ve found.” After a brief pause, Jana added, “I suppose we need to pass this information to the *Knight Shade* as well, just in case something actually does happen.”

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In less than forty-five minutes, Tim was knocking on the door to Zoë’s room in the Alliance HQ hospital; he was greeted by a worried looking Gracelyn Medina. “Thank God it’s you. I’m scheduled for a shift on the other side of the facility. My CO doesn’t seem to feel that Zoë needs any special consideration. She’s due for a final checkup and release on Monday.”

Tim nodded as he thanked the corporal. “I’m here now… but still glad you had time to come by to cover the gap.” With an embarrassed frown, he added, “And I never properly thanked you for assisting her out there…” he inclined his head and waved towards the window, “… after she was injured.” He raised his right hand, which she gripped. “Thank you, Corporal. I appreciate your dedication.”

Medina pumped Tim’s hand twice and replied as she released it. “You’re very welcome.” Turning towards Zoë, she said, “Farewell, Zoë. Stay safe.”

Zoë glanced at Tim before slowly rising from her chair; fixing her steady gaze on the young Marine, she reached out, surprising her with a heartfelt embrace while whispering in her ear. “You have my gratitude as well, and… stay safe in this place, Gracie. I pray there’ll be no further incidents.” Releasing her, she took a step back, nodded silently and returned to her chair.

Medina’s eyes were shiny as she nodded, then briskly left the room. Tim watched as she allowed the door to close behind her, then turned to look at Zoë as she cleared her throat. “So, you told me what you were doing, but not why. Care to elaborate?”

Before he replied, Stafford activated his omnitool and swept the entire room, including the bathroom and closet, for listening devices. Pausing in surprise as he swept the tool past Zoë, he swept the tool a couple more times until it zeroed in on the metal clasp of her robe. Listening device, he thought as he pantomimed for her to remove her robe, which she did after standing up. Taking the garment from her, he inspected the clasp a bit closer and opened a new subroutine on his omnitool, setting the device to disable the electronics inside the clasp; his efforts were rewarded by a minute puff of smoke. He held the robe out for her to push her arms through, then pulled it up and settled it on her shoulders as he asked, “How long has this been here, Zoë?”

Whispering her thanks, she pulled the edges across her chest, answering as she carefully returned to her chair. “It’s a freshly laundered garment… I just pulled it from the closet this morning.”

“So, you weren’t wearing it when Shepard came to visit us?”

After thinking for a moment, she replied, “No. The robe I was wearing definitely did not have a clasp such as this. It wasn’t in my closet either.” Huffing in exasperation, she added, “Damned Alliance. It’ll be so good to be away from this place.” Fixing him with appraising eyes, she said, “Now, tell me what you’ve discovered.”

Zoë shook her head in near disbelief at everything Stafford had divulged concerning the conspiracy; finally speaking in a soft voice, she said, “That LEAP’s, Terra Firma’s and Earth First’s xenophobic beliefs are so widespread within the SA military is not too difficult to accept, Tim. What does strain credibility is their willingness to kill Humans in positions of power and influence. Damn them all to Hell!” She took a sip of water as she attempted to wrap her mind around this new reality. “And you found proof this sergeant – this Diane Häberli – provided the blades to Klein?”

“She covered her tracks extremely well, but her patrol route included the entrance through which
Klein entered the venue. Once he cleared the metal detectors at the gate, he went straight to the restrooms; this was recorded by a camera in the passageway. Häberli can be seen passing that location immediately after Klein, before the feed was scrambled; the timestamp of the last frame in which she was visible is mere seconds before the signal was interrupted. The signal was restored within 48 seconds… 12 seconds before an alarm would have been triggered in the security station. Shortly afterwards, Klein can be seen exiting the restroom and walking back the way he had entered, while Häberli is not seen in the passageway again.”

Thinking about Tim’s explanation, Zoë said, “It appears to me that all you have is speculation, Tim. While it is true that Häberli was in that passage shortly after Klein passed by, there’s really no hard evidence that she passed a pair of blades to him during the time the camera was offline.” Studying Tim’s expression, she added, “You’ve told me of her hostile demeanor after you were detained. I have to wonder if your less than favorable impression of her is not clouding your judgement?”

Stafford leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers in front of his nose and mouth as he thought about Zoë’s words. Studying her eyes and face past his fingertips, several increasingly uncomfortable minutes of silence had passed before he sighed heavily; lowering his hands to rest in his lap, he said, “As we’re working for Spectre Shepard, we’ll need more than circumstantial evidence to successfully bring charges against Sergeant Häberli… or anyone else, won’t we?”

Zoë nodded slowly as he finished speaking. “It doesn’t make me happy either, Tim. I feel a Hell of a lot less secure knowing at least one of Klein’s confederates is stationed within this facility. When you return to base, get Nina to help you do more digging into Häberli’s past, and keep searching for everything you can find concerning Sergeant Scholtz’s background. I don’t like unexplainable coincidences, Tim; both those sergeants working in the same office smells like last week’s garbage, but we can’t accuse them of collusion in this without irrefutable proof.”

Tim smiled as he activated his omnitool. “Nina is already researching Frédéric Klein’s recent history, particularly how he managed to fall off the grid after leaving Cerberus.” He entered a short message, pressed SEND, then closed the interface as he looked at Zoë. “Looking for proof he’s acquainted with Sergeant Häberli may even help her search.”

T'Soni Country Estate, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 18 Oct 2188

Following the visit with Councilor Tevos in her offices, Shepard had reboarded the Knight Shade and instructed Lusmeni to head for Thessia. She wanted to speak with Mozia and Aethyta, to ask about preparing for her interview with the Council of Governesses. By pure luck, that placed them all at the Estate when an unscheduled transport shuttle arrived on Saturday morning, bearing Selina T’Rori and all her personal belongings from the Destiny Ascension. Once the arriving passenger was announced, a tearful Lyessa dropped everything to run to the landing zone.

“By the Goddess! Selina T’Rori! Why did you not tell me you were arriving today?” Lyessa’s protest was cut off as Selina scooped her from the tarmac and swung her around in a circle, kissing her in front of the entire group, all of whom were cheering madly and urging the bonded couple on.

When her spin was complete, Selina dropped Lyessa back onto her own two feet and grinned. “Because I wanted to surprise you, silly! I’ll assume from your reaction, I succeeded!” She immediately renewed the kiss, promptly stopping any reply Lyessa may have had.

Liara laughed and clapped her hands with joy, beaming at the twosome as she stated, “Welcome home, Selina! I, for one, am very happy to see you…” She grinned at Lyessa as she added, “Having not heard from you at all, when a certain someone expected you home on the 15th? Our
Steward has been positively *insufferable* since we arrived Thursday afternoon.”

“I wasn’t *that* bad, was I?” Lyessa blushed as she continued, “Don’t answer that, please… because I know I was. I’m sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it, Lyessa.” Shepard let out a hearty laugh and grinned. “You’re not the only one who gets grouchy when someone is later than expected…” She stepped closer to Liara and wrapped an arm around her bondmate’s waist. “I’ve suffered Liara’s wrath and concern – though generally with good reason – more than once.”

“We’ll get you settled in at Engineering Maintenance… starting Monday, Sel.” Liara’s face shined with happiness for the reunited couple at her focus shifted to Lyessa. “In the meantime, Steward, you are both off duty to enjoy the weekend together. Is that understood?”

Lyessa’s face picked up a bit of color and she chuckled as she responded, “Don’t be silly, Mistress. Sel and I will enjoy our private time together, but it will not impede on our duties… provided you and the Captain can stay out of trouble for the weekend and not demand any special attention?”

“I suppose we can do that. A quiet weekend at home would be a very welcome change of pace right about now.” Shepard couldn’t keep the huge grin off her face as she watched the growing volume of cargo coming off the shuttle. “Besides, from the looks of it, you’ll have quite a bit of equipment and gear to stow… somewhere.”

Selina nodded in agreement. “Yes. I managed to procure some specialty engineering equipment from excess stores aboard the Ascension. House T’Soni is about to have our repair center significantly upgraded.”

Shepard smirked as she replied, “Legally, I presume.”

The newest addition to the staff looked scandalized as she gasped, “But of course! I would never…”

“Oh, Goddess, Sel!” The engineer stopped speaking as Lyessa erupted in laughter before continuing, “You have a lot to learn about our Spectre. She’s obviously teasing you.”

“Don’t worry about it, Selina.” Shepard smiled softly. “Lyessa is absolutely correct. I guess I *should* behave and not tease you, at least until you get to know me.”

Liara scoffed and rolled her eyes. “You? Not tease? That will be the day.”

With a grin and a twinkle in her eye, the Spectre responded, “Ah, you’re right, of course.” Releasing Liara’s waist in exchange for taking her hand, Shepard turned toward the house. “Come on, Selina. You can’t enjoy any personal time with Lyessa if we keep you standing out here on the tarmac!”

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**Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 18 Oct 2188**

Lee Maxwell’s search for the cause of Prime Minister Trost’s death brought on by an allergy to something he had eaten had uncovered multiple clues. After consulting with Émiléda about the ingredients in the salad – specifically, the dressing – and speaking with Tim Stafford, since he had sampled the salad with no ill effects, Max narrowed his focus to the Prime Minister’s early life on Earth.

Reuben Trost was the very embodiment of a self-made man. Having grown up on a small family farm situated in the Yakima valley of Washington state, his parents were never more than one bad
harvest away from financial disaster; this explained why in-vitro gene therapy had been well beyond their financial reach. He had been diagnosed with an allergy to honey as a young child; a few years after this discovery, he was also found to be allergic to peanuts – in any form – but especially peanut oil. And, while his allergies to either honey or peanuts was not life-threatening, if taken together, ingestion of even ten milliliters of peanut oil mixed with honey could prove to be lethal.

Max learned that Trost’s parents had not hidden his allergies from those that needed to know about them, primarily the student resource officials at the public schools he had attended. But, as a young man in college, public knowledge of his allergies faded quickly with his growing independence and control over his own diet. Max now fully believed, beyond any reasonable doubt, the contents of the dressing used in the salad, a blend of honey-mustard in a light vegetable oil – specifically, peanut oil, rather than the olive oil that was normally used – had led to a rapid onset of lethal anaphylaxis. The only questions that remained to be answered was who had learned of the Prime Minister’s food allergies, and to whom in the Alliance kitchens had that knowledge been directed. With a heavy sigh, Max once again sent a meeting request to Émiléda.

Alliance Military Facility, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 20 Oct 2188

Jana Cantrell had brought the clothes Zoë had requested; unlike the attire she had been wearing for the dedication, today she was wearing an outfit more akin to what she had been wearing when she returned to lead the remnants of Cerberus the previous year. Unseen under the lower edge of her long, hooded cloak was a leather belt slung around her torso just above her hipbones, with a hard point receptacle on the right side for an M-11 Suppressor heavy pistol, which Jana would give her when they reached the X3M Tim Stafford was bringing around to collect the two women for the ride back.

Jana had expressed shocked amazement upon seeing the angry scars left in Zoë’s left side by Klein’s blade. “Why didn’t Doctor Stegmann use a dermal regenerator on those wounds, Zoë?”

Wearing only a pair of skimpy panties and a black sports bra, she faced the full-length mirror and twisted her body to the right in order to study the reflection of her left side. “I don’t want to ever forget how that knife felt in my side, Jana. This scar…” she placed her fingertips next to what appeared to be an angry zipper running in a jagged, diagonal line across her side, just above her left hipbone, “… was the first hit. Klein tore his blade back out at an angle and stabbed me a second time.” The smaller of the two scars was no wider than the knife that had made it, but the blade’s 19-centimeter length had been buried to its hilt in her side. Zoë turned back towards Jana, saying, “Physically, I’ve healed… well, I’m short one kidney, but I’m still alive. These scars will remind me every day for the rest of my life how close I came to dying that day.”

She quietly pulled on her compression top, followed by a pair of opaque black tights, her wool skirt and a short-sleeve tank-top under Jana’s watchful eye; before pulling on her boots, she retrieved the knife Gracie had returned and strapped it to the outside of her right calf with the pommel even with her kneecap. With her boots on, she pulled on her cloak and, after raising the hood up over her head, nervously asked her XO, “How do I look?”

“Are you kidding me? Zoë, you look every bit as amazing as the day you returned to us after leading Angel…” her voice hitched as she said Warren’s name; a brief, pained look from Zoë spoke volumes about how they felt concerning Angelique’s death. Coughing to clear the sudden restriction in her throat, Jana continued on. “… Angel and Tim across two-thirds of the damned galaxy. I’ve already told you I was scared out of my mind about your fate! With Hackett and Trost dead, I was terrified you had been killed as well, and the Alliance was simply covering it up.” An expression of
anguish washed briefly across her features as she concluded, “Command staff here refused all my requests for information, and Riana Iregos was less than cordial and even less accommodating when she called.”

Zoë had never had a family – or anyone close – while growing up. Now, the Atlas people she worked with had become a surrogate family, with Jana Cantrell as the big sister she might have wished for when she was younger. Zoë stepped up to the woman and wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug. She whispered, “I feel really bad to have worried you so, Jana. I truly cannot imagine how awful not knowing our fate was for you.”

Jana smiled as Zoë released her and stepped back, saying, “You’re still alive. It’s been a long three weeks without you, but now you’re free to leave this place. Today, that’s all that matters to me.” Crooking her right elbow, Jana began walking from the room as Zoë looped her hand into the offered support.

In short order, Zoë was presented with her release documents, including the written promise of receiving a cloned kidney to replace the organ that Klein had shredded with his blade. Once the pair had cleared the security checkpoints, they rode the elevator down to ground level and started down the passageway for the guarded main entrance/exit.

Just before reaching the large double doors, the sound of someone trotting towards them from behind nearly had Zoë reaching for her concealed knife as she turned to face a possible threat. A relieved smile lit her face as she recognized the source of the running feet; Corporal Gracelyn Medina slid to a stop in front of the pair as Zoë straightened to greet her.

“You wouldn’t be attempting to leave without saying goodbye to me, would you?”

Zoë reached out with both arms to pull Medina in for a hug. With her mouth beside the corporal’s ear, she whispered, “I’m really happy you came to see me off, Gracie… and this most definitely is not goodbye. We’re friends now… and don’t forget I’ll be back in five or six months so Doctor Stegmann can implant a new kidney.” Before releasing her, Zoë surprised the Marine with a soft kiss on her cheek. “And I had better see you a lot sooner than that!”

Gracie’s face held a hint of pink as she looked into Zoë’s ebony eyes and stammered, “Um, well… in that case, um… you take care of yourself out there, Ma’am. You have my contact info, so send me a note if you need, um… well, anything, or just to let me know how you’re doing.”

Zoë’s smile was radiant as she replied, “You’ve made my stay here a lot more pleasant than I had any right to expect, Gracie. I will not forget that… ever. Watch your six, okay?”

Not trusting her voice, Medina nodded, first to Zoë, then to Jana, before turning on her heel and walking slowly back the way she had come.

Jana watched her for a few moments before turning to Zoë and observing, “You made a friend for life with that one, I think. Hold her close, Zoë. You may very well need her assistance here in the near future.” Zoë turned back towards the doors, but not before Jana observed thin trails of moisture slowly traveling down her cheeks. *Looks like Medina made a real impression on Zoë as well,* came the thought. *That’s a good thing… she needs every friend she can find.*

Zoë Lawrence stepped out through the hospital doors into the light drizzle of a foggy early autumn morning. Once through the heavy doors, they stood for a few moments as Jana used her omnitool to let Tim know he needed to bring the speeder up to the circular drive. While standing with Jana, Zoë took a breath of the moisture-laden air and commented, “I know there’s no possible difference, but the air out here just seems to smell better than what’s in that building.”
Noting the slight look of amusement in Jana’s expression, she smiled in return as Tim brought the X3M around from their left, stopping in front of the pair as they slowly descended the wide steps outside the building. He popped the doors and jumped out to assist, taking the clothing and other items Jana had been carrying and placing them in the left-hand back seat as Zoë gingerly slid onto the right rear. Jana picked up the M-11 Tim had brought and handed it back to Zoë, before joining her compatriots in the small craft. Once they had settled in, Tim closed the side doors and top canopy before engaging the compact eezo core and pointing the nose for home.

Zoë remained silent as she studied the city streaming past the canopy – revealed by turns to be newly rebuilt, followed by shattered mounds of concrete and masonry – as Tim monitored the control interface. Noting Zoë’s interest in the passing scenery, he said, “Not much progress to see here… you were only in that place for a few weeks.”

She chuckled humorlessly as she replied, “Seems like months. I’ve never been down for such a long time.” After a few moments of silence, she directed her attention to Cantrell, saying, “I need to go shopping for armor, Jana. I know there is a light-weight, combat mesh available that will turn most blades… I could kick myself for not thinking to at least have something like that on over my compression top.”

“You’ll need all new blouses and tank-tops as well, then,” came the reply. Looking over her shoulder at Zoë, she added with a smirk as she purposely directed her gaze at her chest, “Otherwise, the additional thickness underneath will make everything you wear just a bit… too snug.” Zoë returned Jana’s smirk with one of her own as Cantrell fell silent to ponder on what Zoë needed to acquire. When she began speaking again, her voice held a touch of concern. “I think we need to record your measurements and request some samples be sent to us. I really don’t think it would be wise for you to be seen shopping for light armor. The less the public – and the military – knows about your intervention on Hoffman’s behalf, the better.”

Sighing in resignation, Zoë quietly replied, “I agree. Best not to advertise my involvement at all. Needing Spectre Shepard to intervene on our behalf brought a lot more attention to us than is healthy for an organization such as ours. Not that I’m complaining… her words cut through a huge amount of bureaucratic crap for us. I’m just glad we’re working on the same side, for a change.”
Shepard and Liara had spent much of their Monday trip to Serrice with Mozia, in final preparation for the impending citizenship hearing. The matriarch had scoffed over Tevos’ comment regarding a small Council of Governesses. “Most Asari are very active participants in the political process; their self-governance is extremely important to them. They will not accept being unrepresented in the committee sessions. As such, following each arrest the republics had selected candidates within two days and chosen their new governess on the third.”

“Three days?” Even Liara had looked a bit bewildered at the speed. “I really must sit down with you and learn more of the process; I honestly had no idea it could happen so quickly!”

After releasing an understanding chuckle, Mozia had then proceeded to coach them on each of the new selections. None appeared to be hostile to House T’SONI and all would see the benefits of having Captain and Spectre Samantha Shepard as a recognized citizen of Thessia. “It is likely you will be asked about your preferences regarding the new Armali Governess. As the discussion will take part in an open forum, your popular choice could hold significant influence, particularly over those who are yet undecided.”

Liara raised a brow mark and glanced at Shepard as the Spectre asked, “And I presume we should be supporting a particular candidate?”

“Not necessarily… each has her own merits and it could be a close decision, which is why the committee may ask for your opinion.” Mozia had smiled softly. “With your current popularity and the level of trust you have garnered from the Asari general population, your preference could be the deciding factor.”

“And you missed my point. I don’t have the time to do the research on such short notice, so I don’t have a preference. Who am I to recommend as House T’Soni’s choice of a candidate… and why?” Shepard remembered grinning at the matriarch’s expression of surprise at the directness of her question.
Mozia recovered quickly and was halfway through her explanation as to why they should support Matriarch Stefana K’Pani’s candidacy when Shepard’s omnitool pinged with an incoming message marked ‘Urgent.’

All three were shocked when they received the news as a visibly angry Shepard glanced at Mozia. “Excuse me, Matriarch, but Frédéric Klein was somehow murdered while sedated within a guarded Alliance medical isolation ward; I need to place a secure call.” With a quick understanding gesture from Mozia, Liara jumped up to follow as Shepard stormed off, headed for the Information Operations Center.

As the door slid to the side, the Spectre walked in, brusquely demanding, “Get me a direct line to Zoë Lawrence. Now!”

“Certainly, Spectre.” A surprised Riana immediately set to work on making the connection as she queried, “Might I inquire as to what has transpired?”

“I just received a message from Admiral Lindholm… Frédéric Klein is dead.”

Riana frowned. “And you think this a rather odd coincidence that such a thing happens immediately following that woman’s release from the hospital?”

Shepard sighed as the screen before her flickered to life. “I’m not sure what to think… but I’m sure as Hell going to ask the question.”

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Vancouver B.C., Earth, At Large – 20 Oct 2188

Zoë was surprised when her omnitool chirped with an incoming call and she recognized the ident code of the Aletheia. With a concerned glance at Jana, she entered her ident code and opened her omnitool to accept the call. Looking at the irritated face that coalesced before her, she spoke hesitantly. “Capt. Shepard. I did not expect to hear from you on the day of my release.”

Shepard, attempting to keep her anger under control, replied in as neutral a tone as she could manage. “Ms Lawrence, before I say anything more, I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt. You were discharged from the hospital as scheduled, correct?”

Zoë was instantly on guard. “You are correct. What has happened, Captain? I can see you’re upset and cannot help but assume that you somehow believe I am the source of your distress.”

“I extended my trust to you and your organization, Zoë, and I feel compelled to remind you that my approval is an absolute necessity for any operations you undertake in your area… especially those that may involve lethal force.” Shepard’s scowl intensified as she added, “Frédéric Klein is dead… with a Cerberus blade buried in the middle of his chest. I received the notification from Admiral Lindholm at nearly the same time as your scheduled release from the hospital… and I don’t believe in coincidences, Zoë.”

A chill went through Zoë; glancing briefly at Jana and Tim for reassurance, she looked back at the image in front of her and calmly replied, “Sincerely, I am sorry to hear that, Spectre, and the implied accusation that either myself or one of my people was somehow involved would be insulting if it was coming from anyone else. I will not lie to you, Shepard, and I swear to you now that I did not kill Frédéric Klein… nor were any of my people involved in his death.”

“Damn it, Zoë! I had a lot of questions I needed to ask that man!”
“As did I, Spectre,” Zoë interrupted as Shepard paused to take a breath. “The bastard left Cerberus and managed to completely disappear right before the end of the war. He had been living totally off the grid until he shoved a blade into my kidney at the dedication. We wanted to learn how he had been surviving and where he had been hiding all this time.”

Shepard sighed heavily, the scowl on her face having gradually lessened as Zoë was speaking. When she spoke again, it was in a less confrontational tone. “Zoë, I really want to believe you… There is nothing worse in this life than a trust betrayed. I apologize if it sounded as if I was accusing you of Klein’s murder, but you have to admit, Zoë, a Cerberus blade left in a person’s chest just as you are leaving the hospital certainly looks like your previous deeds.”

Zoë huffed, more in agreement than exasperation. “Your assessment of my signature style is certainly accurate but, in my defense, Klein managed to have not one, but two Cerberus blades when he attacked me. The one he left in my side was obviously confiscated by the authorities, as was the dagger in my possession when I was stripped of my clothes and gear in the hospital. That leaves one blade unaccounted for… which we may have mistakenly presumed to be securely stashed away in an evidence locker.”

Glancing out the canopy at the passing landscape, then catching Jana’s eye, she continued, “Since I have been under constant watch the past 72 hours, my guess is they gave up on trying to get to me… and decided on attempting to frame me for murder as the next best alternative. They will not be able to get to me at my base of operations, but they’d certainly have access to me in prison.” Her expression shifted from annoyance to anger. “Grant me a day, maybe two, Spectre. Atlas will uncover how a Cerberus blade found its way into Frédéric Klein’s chest.”

“No deaths, Zoë. Someone inside that facility has blood on their hands. I want to speak with that someone before I drop the hammer.” Shepard’s visage turned grim once more. “Particularly if it’s someone in the Alliance… like Mr Stafford’s sergeant… Häberli?”

“On my honor, Spectre Shepard.” Zoë continued and growled, “We will find them… and when we do, I’ll be in touch.”

Council of Governesses, Serrice Government Building, Thessia – 20 Oct 2188

Even though they had been informed by Mozia as to the number of governesses who would likely be in attendance, Shepard and Liara were still somewhat surprised when they entered the council chamber; the table was completely full except for the Armali seat. Mozia had said it was normal for at least one or two to miss each session but, today, every republic’s Governess – old and new alike – was in attendance. Shepard bowed slightly in respect, then made a point of making sure they all saw her disable her translator as she returned to a full, upright position. She could see the pleased surprise on several faces as she delivered a standard formal greeting in flawless Thessian.

“Welcome, Spectre Shepard. Lady T’Soni.” The senior Governess, Cyla T’Shasia rose from her chair and offered a quick bow in return before directing her gaze at the Human of the pair and continuing, “Believe me when I say it is our pleasure to receive your petition for citizenship, Captain. To begin, we would like to hear from you why you would ask for such a thing. We have several Humans living on Thessia… but none have ever petitioned to become a full citizen; to us, such a request is highly irregular.”

Shepard smiled softly and, somewhat to the maiden’s surprise, reached over to take Liara’s hand. “It’s very simple, really. If it’s not blatantly obvious, I love Liara with all that I am, and we plan to live and raise our children here, on Thessia. I know you think that’s not possible for us, given a
normal Human life span, so there is something you need to understand… something that isn’t included on the application or in any of the affidavits.” She paused briefly and took a deep breath in preparation to tell her biggest secret. “Only my closest friends and family know anything of what I am about to share with you so, as a show of respect for Liara and me… and with the trust I am granting you, I ask you to handle this information with a confidentiality akin to a doctor–patient relationship. Agreed?”

Her eyes examined the matriarchs before her as they whispered quickly amongst themselves. Cyla finally turned back to face Shepard, her expression solemn as she replied, “It is agreed, Spectre. Until the end of your… disclosure… we will cease all recordings of this council session. If word ever gets out, it will not be from us, we swear it.” She opened a haptic interface and made the necessary entries as she spoke. “Let the record show the session recording will pause, to resume as appropriate following Spectre Shepard’s testimony. Activating privacy barrier.” The haptic interface shifted to red and Cyla looked up with a hesitant smile. “Shepard. Privacy mode is set; please continue.”

With a quick nod, Shepard began. “By now, most people in the galaxy have to realize I received extensive physical upgrades… but they are far beyond what most know or understand. Along with them, I have an extended lifetime… and I’m not speaking a few extra decades; I’m talking centuries. My friends are aware that initial estimates gave me a bit over 400 years…” She paused as matriarchal discipline wiped the disbelief from the faces before her and then continued, “… However, recent discoveries have upped even that number; significantly so. My genetic structure was modified to include both Krogan and Asari coding and, apparently, my vastly extended lifespan is an unexpected side effect. The newest estimate, of which no one but my personal medical team is aware, approaches 900 years… give or take a few decades. They quite honestly don’t know what it will ultimately turn out to be.”

“By the Goddess!” Cyla gasped in wonder. “That would be amazing! An evolutionary marvel! Why would you not want to share this information with Humanity? The University of Serrice Genetics Department would love to…” She stopped abruptly as the expression on Shepard’s face shifted to one of annoyance. Understanding suddenly flashed across the Asari’s face before she continued, “Which is exactly why you do not want this to be known. You wouldn’t have a moment’s peace. You would become an object of study, with no privacy… no personal life. You would be continuously hounded by researchers as an anomaly… an aberration.” She shook her head in consolation. “Even more so than you are now. I am so sorry, Shepard. Eventually, people will figure out you are not aging as expected for a human; at some indeterminant point in the future, you will have to fight that battle, no matter how quiet we are about it.”

She glanced around the table, meeting the eyes of each individual governess as she stated, “But it is your secret to share or keep as you see fit… and most certainly not our place to speak of it.” Once she received nods of agreement, she turned back to the Human in question. “Though, having said that, I do have to wonder why you would even tell us.”

“Because, as you said, you would figure it out eventually. I don’t want you making your decision on my citizenship under the false assumption that I’ll only be living on Thessia for the duration of a standard Human lifespan.” Shepard grinned. “It’s just like everything else I do; if I’m in, I’m in for the long haul and I’m not here for only the next century. You’ll have to deal with me for nearly a millennium. Are you ready for that?”

“Ready?” The Dassus Governess, Falis S’Treuss, chuckled. “I do not believe anyone is ever truly ready for you, Spectre, no matter what they may think! But I, for one, am as ready as one can be for you to become a Thessian citizen.” Her eyes wandered the table as she continued, “And I do believe I speak for us all in this matter.”
Murmurs of affirmation swelled from the table and Cyla raised her hand. “One moment please…” She keyed the haptic interface before her one more time and stated, “Privacy mode released. Let the record show the session recording has resumed and we are prepared to offer our votes regarding the citizenship petition of Spectre Samantha Shepard, Captain of the House T’Soni Guard and bondmate to Lady Liara T’Soni. Anerzesa?”

Cyrana responded immediately with a ‘Yes,’ as did every other matriarch in turn.

“Motion passed.” Cyla had a huge, friendly smile on her face as she announced, “Congratulations, Spectre Shepard-T’Soni. We welcome you as a citizen of Thessia!”

“Thank you, one and all.” Shepard offered another small bow and then added, “If there is nothing else, we’ll be on our way and allow you to finish your meeting.”

“Actually…” Cyla glanced at the council members, most of whom urged her onward with nods of encouragement, so she continued, “We are curious if you and Lady T’Soni have a preference from among the current candidates to fill the vacant Governess position for Armali… seeing as it is your home republic?”

With a knowing grin, Shepard raised an eyebrow and looked to Liara, prodding her through the link to answer as the leader of House T’Soni. With a smile of acceptance of the silent exchange, Liara turned to the council and responded, “As a matter of fact, Governesses, we do.”

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Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 20 Oct 2188

Upon her return to Atlas’ base, Zoë held a brief meeting with her senior staff. After asking most of them to return to their tasks, she had Jana, Tim Stafford and Nina Delacroix accompany her to her private office, where she got right to business.

“Nina, I am aware you’ve been researching Frédéric Klein’s history after he left Cerberus. Unfortunately, I need you to really double down on that; what I did not reveal during our staff meeting is the news Spectre Shepard delivered during our trip back here from the hospital. Within minutes of me leaving the building, Frédéric Klein was found in his bed with a Cerberus blade buried in his chest.”

The look of shock on Nina’s face was quickly replaced with an expression of steely resolve as she quietly asked, “You need me to discover the who and how, correct?”

With a quick glance at Tim and Jana, Zoë replied, “Exactly. Tim will assist; since he has managed to all but prove Sergeant Diane Häberli is the inside person responsible for supplying the blades Klein needed for his task at the dedication, I need you both to discover three things.”

Zoë’s mouth was set in a straight, grim line as she set out Tim and Nina’s tasks. “Most importantly, we need Klein’s patron… who is the scumbag bottom-feeder that ordered and paid for the attempt on Ambassador Hoffman. Secondly, but no less critical, we absolutely must know, beyond any doubt, who paid Sergeant Diane Häberli to furnish Klein’s weapons of choice… and finally, if Häberli is not guilty of ending Klein, then who is responsible for employing a Cerberus blade, one which I firmly believe was Klein’s second weapon, to end his life in a manner that would throw a dark cloud of suspicion on me.”

Zoë stood up and added, “You both have two days, and whatever data you uncover will go straight to Spectre Shepard. She has the authority to demand cooperation from the facility commandant; we
find the guilty parties, so she can then do whatever needs to be done.”


T'Soni Country Estate, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 20 Oct 2188

When they returned from Serrice, Shepard and Liara’s plans for a quiet evening at home were happily shattered by a surprise party; as they entered the house, Mozia and Aethyta were there to greet the newest Asari citizen at the door. Aethyta boomed, “Congratulations, Shepard! You are officially one of us now!” Mozia, always the more professional of the two, rolled her eyes before adding, “Yes, congratulations, Captain… as if there was ever any doubt the Council of Governesses would accept your petition.” Standing aside, she beckoned them forward. “Now, please, relax and enjoy yourselves this evening. While your success was completely expected, it is still big news for House T’Soni and worthy of the celebration awaiting you within.”

As they entered to mingle with the crowd, Liara was amazed at just how many of their extended family had shown up to celebrate with them. Of course, the entire crew of the Knight Shade was in attendance, but Kahlee Sanders, Hannah Shepard, the crew of the Night Shadow, and many of those they knew within the Armali Strike Force had also somehow adjusted their schedules to attend the event. As it turned out, the leads of the commando teams at the Armali Townhouse had a shooting competition to see who had to remain behind to keep watch, while the rest of the household had climbed into transports to head to the Estate. Lieutenant Teana Seloni, who was Team 1 lead for a reason, had the privilege to attend with her squad, while Team 2 was forced to remain behind on guard duty.

The ones that most surprised Liara were the other house matriarchs; both Matriarch Sashia of T’Sere Shipwrights and Matriarch Marisha of the Záhrada S’Vatyne Resort were also in attendance. The last was probably the most unexpected and Liara greeted her warmly. “Matriarch, it is so good to see you again! Please, do tell me you brought Carlina along with you, else I’ll never hear the end of it from Livos!”

Laughing joyfully, the matriarch responded, “But of course I did! Truthfully, I offered to host this soirée, but we couldn’t come up with a story good enough to be confident we could lure the two of you to Sanves in a timely fashion… and what is a party without its guest of honor? So, we simply had to come to you, instead.”

“I honestly had no idea my application for citizenship would be such a big deal.” Shepard shrugged her shoulders in bewilderment and continued, “I just don’t get it.”

Hannah and Kahlee slid up on both sides of her, each slipping an arm around Samantha to give her a quick squeeze as Hannah chuckled, “That’s because you’re the darling of the galaxy, Sam… and Thessia just won your favor.”

“And, it seems, everyone recognizes that except for Earth.” Kahlee grinned. “What’s that old saying? Familiarity breeds contempt? They didn’t realize what they had, and now they’ve lost it.”

Liara had slipped away to get drinks for her and Samantha, and returned just in time to add in a bitter tone, “They didn’t lose anything. They drove her away with their presumptuousness and animosity.” A smile returned to her face as she handed a glass of honey mead to Shepard. “Though, I suppose that is unfair of me to say since we were planning on doing it anyway, no matter what anyone else said or did. Honestly, it’s as simple as that… so I apologize if I spoiled the mood; this is a celebration, after all.”

“No apology necessary, Liara. I understand why you would feel that way… and I know Sam loves
you very much.” Hannah reached out and laid a motherly hand on the Asari’s arm. “I am also well aware your children will be Asari, so need to be raised on Asari soil. From what Karin has told me, the naturally occurring eezo is very important during their biotics formative years… and it would be an extremely difficult environment to replicate anywhere else.” A huge grin broke across her face as she added, “And I, for one, most certainly want my grandbabies growing up in the best possible environment for them, which is right here on Thessia!”

Liara blushed profusely, turning a rather deep blue. To hide her embarrassment, she simply took a step forward and wrapped Hannah in a hug, tucking her face into the woman’s shoulder as she giggled, “Goddess! It is no mystery where Samantha gets her straightforwardness!”

“I’m sure of it!” Hannah let go a laugh as she tightly hugged her daughter-in-law in return and continued, “I didn’t intend to embarrass you, Liara.”

“Don’t be silly, Mom. It’s no secret that Liara blushes easily by our standards… or that we are definitely planning to have kids.” Shepard smiled and moved to Liara’s side, wrapping an arm around the Asari’s waist and pulling her close. “But she also has a constitution of titanium when it comes to protecting those she loves… and I count on her strength every day.”

They all chuckled again as Liara’s blush renewed, though not as dark the second time. “Thank you, Siame. I love and depend upon you as well.” She looked back up to meet the eyes of the people – the friends – surrounding her and a contented smile crossed her face. “It just struck me… We are so incredibly lucky to have friends and family such as you, surrounding us with your love and lending us your strength when times get difficult. Thank you all, from the bottom of our hearts, for coming to help us celebrate our futures together. But, for now, we must move on. As much as I’d like to stay right here, we have many guests yet to speak with.”

Before Liara pulled her away, Shepard asked, “Mom? Kay? Are you heading out this evening or spending the night with us?”

Hannah answered for them both. “Go enjoy your guests, kiddo. We’re sticking around until lunch tomorrow, so we can chat and catch up in the morning.”

“Excellent!” Shepard’s grin spread ear-to-ear and she grabbed Liara’s hand. “Come on, Grá mo chroí! Let’s go see who all is here!”

Seeing the confusion on the faces of the matriarchs at their side, Hannah turned to them and smiled. “Don’t worry, there is nothing wrong with your translators. It’s an old Earth language, Gaelic, and it’s a nickname Samantha has for Liara… It means love of my heart.”

“How marvelous! Thank you for the translation, Admiral.” Marisha glanced up and smiled, continuing with a gentle, musical laugh. “I do believe the House Steward would like a word with you. She seems to be hovering.”

“What?” Hannah turned to look. “Lyessa is supposed to be enjoying time with her recently returned bondmate…” She looked back to Marisha and continued, “If you’ll excuse me, Matriarch, I’d like to see what she needs from me, so she can get back to Selina.”

“Certainly.” Marisha smiled softly. “I hope your stay on Thessia is a pleasant one, Admiral.”

“Yours as well, Matriarch… and, in case we don’t have a chance to speak again, have a safe trip back to Sanves.”
T'Soni Country Estate, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 20 Oct 2188

Carlina couldn’t help the wide grin that spread across her lips as she watched the Aletheia come in and land. Not wanting to ruin the surprise, she waited patiently until Livos made her way to the house. As the captain of Liara’s Personal Guard walked through the door, Livos’ attention was drawn to Aethyta’s booming welcome, so the commando did not see the nature guide until a hand fell softly on her bicep, accompanied by a soft voice. “Welcome home, Liv.”

“Zan!” Livos spun to the side, her eyes wide in surprise at the unexpected presence of her amantia. “What are you doing here?” As Carlina chuckled at the response, Livos’ skin darkened in mortification and she blurted, “Goddess! That sounded awful, didn’t it?” Laughing at herself, she amended her question into a statement. “I am amazed to see you here, but it is a very welcome surprise!”

Before Zan could formulate a response, a deep, course voice interrupted. “Good to see you, V’Zanto! It’s been too damned quiet around here with all the politicking.” Hailot Jatok actually winked at the couple and laughed as he added, “Livos needs a good roll in the grass to get her blood pumping… but she’s got shit to do first!”

Livos grinned and punched him in the shoulder as he rumbled by, heading for the armory. “You might be right, Jat, but just maybe Zan intends to help strip me of my armor and weapons… Maybe she’ll help you, too, if you ask nice!”

Zan’s eyes widened a bit and she glanced at Livos as the Krogan answered, “Oho… Don’t tease me, Tanni.” His eyes once again traveled to Zan and his maw opened into a toothy grin. “She’s cute enough; I just might do that.”

Livos laughed and looped her arm through Carlina’s. “Don’t worry about that big oaf, Zan. He’s a lot of Krogan, but he has the proper manners of a Justicar when it comes to his friends!”

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Carlina’s hands worked quickly, undoing clasps and fasteners, and Livos was soon free of all her weapons and equipment. After quickly stowing it all in the appropriate lockers, the couple was on their way to Livos’ private room, hand-in-hand as they walked through the hallways toward the commando quarters. Livos spoke quietly, in an almost reverent whisper. “It is good to see you, Zan… a rather pleasant surprise. I only wish we had more than an afternoon.”

Carlina smiled softly and responded, “It is true Matriarch Marisha is returning to Sanves this evening… but she has given me leave to stay the whole week, should your schedule permit.”

Livos stopped in her tracks and turned to her lover, her grip on Zen’s hand tightening in reflex. “The whole week? And you’re not teasing me?”

Zan gave a tug and resumed walking. “Never… not about something like that. To do so would be cruel and that is one thing I will never be to you, Liv. Not even in jest.”

As soon as the door closed behind them, Zan spun Livos against it and pinned her with a long, passionate kiss. “I’ve been wanting to do that since you stepped off your ship, Amantia.”

“Goddess… You certainly didn’t need to wait until now to do so!” Livos answered, breathlessly. “Everyone knows we are lovers… and all of them are probably wondering if our relationship has cooled, due to our extended separation.”

“I very much doubt that,” Carlina chuckled. “If so, they don’t know you as well as they should after
all your years as Captain. They simply know you as the reserved captain that you are.”

“That is likely very true, Zan.” Livos’ mouth widened into a teasing grin as she continued, “So, let us not disappoint them, now that we have our privacy.”

Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large – 22 Oct 2188

Commander Ashley Williams, enjoying a late breakfast in the crew’s mess area, applied a bit of berry jam to the last corner of toasted bread; she popped it in her mouth and, after chewing for a moment or two, drank the last of her coffee.

She had been thinking about the end of September QEC call she’d received from Councilor Raesia Tevos. With the galaxy’s defeat of the Reapers barely fifteen months behind them, one of the Alliance Navy’s most influential leaders had been murdered in the middle of a celebration in Vancouver. Of all the atrocities committed during the war and immediately after by Humans against others of their kind, this one – for Ashley – was the most egregious.

Fleet Admiral Steven Hackett, rather than retiring, had chosen to continue serving the Systems Alliance as the Military Secretary to EA Prime Minister Reuben Trost, himself a victim of an acute allergic reaction to some seemingly innocuous addition in the tossed salad being served at the after-ceremony luncheon. Both men had been murdered as part of a four-target assassination conspiracy; that Arthur Hoffman, the EA Prime Minister to Palaven, and Galactic Council member Dominic Osoba had each managed to elude death at the hands of their attackers was only due to the extraordinary efforts by an as yet unnamed woman in attendance and of Ashley’s fellow Spectre – and friend – Samantha Shepard.

With a heavy sigh, Ashley rose from her seat, picked up her dishes and utensils and moved to the small cleanup area; she washed and put everything away as she continued to think about Shepard. Tevos had relayed the news that Samantha planned to renounce her citizenship – her Human citizenship – in order to become a citizen of Thessia.

That hadn’t bothered Williams nearly as much as having Tevos tell her of Shepard’s pain at nearly losing a dear friend during the Collector campaign, when they had crossed paths on Horizon. She remembered her parting words just as clearly as if she had said them yesterday: “How can I trust you, Shepard, when you’re working with the enemy?”

Leaning heavily against the counter near the sink, Ashley closed her eyes at the memory of Shepard’s expression – the shocked hurt in her eyes – at Ashley’s condemnation. As if I had physically slapped her.

Eyes open once again, she glanced at the Med Bay windows as she moved around the elevator tower on her way to the CIC. Does no good to dwell on that now, she thought. Shepard forgave me… forgave my lack of trust after we made the run to Mars during the Reaper invasion. It was truly unfortunate that – given all that humanity had accomplished when working with the other races of the galaxy – an increasingly vocal and hostile minority of Humans continued to push for Humans to rule over the rest of the galaxy’s races. Just like Jack Harper had been attempting.

Specialist Dubow had been monitoring reports coming through the comms buoys; Westerlund News ‘reporter’ Natasha Goodwin was continuously harping on what she called Shepard’s reckless abandonment of Human citizenship, stating it only validated her long-held belief that the former Alliance captain had always been an alien apologist – since well before Sovereign’s attack on the Citadel in 2183 – which she had continuously demonstrated with her willingness to bend over backwards for the other races. “The ultimate proof is on Shepard’s wrist!” Goodwin had then grimaced in disgust and practically yelled. “She even married one of those things!”
Ashley had growled contemptuously at the news clip, telling Dubow the so-called reporter was simply following the anti-alien, anti-military sensationalism that was standard practice for the tabloid. “I remember Shepard telling me of her confrontation on the Citadel with Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani after the woman had the utter gall to criticize Shepard for abandoning Earth at the beginning of the Reaper invasion. The commander had gruffly explained her actions and then totally shocked al-Jilani by asking her to keep the pressure on the Council… to not let them forget Earth and what they were going through while Shepard was out fighting.”

Dubow’s eyes were wide in disbelief and he had let out a quiet chuckle as Ashley continued, “They developed a grudging mutual respect that day when Shepard told her to keep asking the tough questions. Shortly after that, al-Jilani switched networks and Goodwin took her place, becoming the epitome of every miserably hateful thing you’ve ever heard about tabloid news reporters, all rolled into one extremely abrasive person. That woman is worse than Khalisah ever dreamed of being!”

Still thinking of Tevos’ announcement and wondering at her own reaction – that she could have ever seen the skipper as a traitor to the Alliance – brought back the memory of the Normandy’s visit to Beijing just after the war’s conclusion, when the reactivated Geth had been invited to join the reformed Galactic Council. The city had been on the brink of chaos, with half the people thinking that Shepard was a race traitor… a sell-out… looking to gain power and control through the use of the intelligent machines. Knowing how it all worked out in the end, Ashley scoffed at the absurdity of it all and pushed the thoughts away, just as she pushed off the side wall of the elevator when it arrived at Deck 2.

As the doors opened onto the CIC, she stepped out and mounted the steps to the command platform, looking to XO Leon Rensch for a status update. Glancing up from his work station on the starboard side of the galaxy map projection well, he smiled grimly as he reconfigured the display to focus on Council and Earth Alliance space.

“It’s been really quiet out there, Ma’am… a bit too quiet for my taste. You’ll remember that the Nalotir disappeared last week; the relay recorded an unidentified ship transiting for Pax. No way for us to track her further from here, but since then, we’ve received several reports of piracy from Turian freighters in the Serpent Nebula and the Apien Crest. She’s raiding for supplies again, and seeing as only Turians are being targeted, it’s a safe bet they’re grocery shopping.”

After closely studying the galaxy map for several minutes, Ashley adjusted the view to include the Omega Nebula and said, “I believe they’ll return through the Sahrarik Relay – maybe even stop off at Omega Station long enough to trade whatever non-food goods they’ve stolen for more Dextro.” After spending a few minutes studying the systems around the core, she concluded, “In any event, I’d be willing to bet the Nalotir will return here from Omega… possibly in the next day or two.” Activating the comms unit in her ear, she said, “Joker, plot the orientation for the relay to receive traffic from Sahrarik and then find us a place to hide… one that’s close enough for us to monitor arrivals, but still avoid detection.”

As Joker acknowledged her instructions, she glanced at her XO, saying, “We’ll continue monitoring for any fleet movements, but I’d like to know when the Nalotir returns. We need to monitor whatever comes through the relay from Sahrarik. It would be really great if we can discover a way to detect that ship when it’s cloaked; I believe when it drops out of FTL beside the relay will be the best chance for us to see it, even if for only a few moments.”

Rensch smiled as he acknowledged her. “Aye, Ma’am.”
A Foot in the Door

Chapter Notes

A'i'a me: a trusted friend and unquestioned ally (Source: CDN)

Amantia - lover (Thessian)

Sim’re - “sister of my sister”, a dear friend's loved one (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 22 Oct 2188

Nina Delacroix had been looking into Frédéric Klein’s recent history for five full days, ever since Riana Iregos had shared the data Spectre Shepard’s team had compiled on the assassination plot; she had assembled what seemed to her like a pathetically negligible amount of recent data. But now, with the addition of Tim Stafford’s research on Sergeant Diane Häberli’s connection to Klein, she believed Atlas was finally within striking distance of having the evidence Spectre Shepard needed to prove the seriousness – and danger – of the anti-alien sentiment within the Alliance military.

She had taken Stafford’s video – with the glitch in the recording of Häberli following Klein to the restroom – and dug deeper into the Alliance surveillance servers. After meticulously hacking her way deep into the video data recorded that day, she had finally found the original footage in a deleted back-up cache. Once she had filtered out the electronic interference on that portion of the recording, she discovered that it proved beyond any doubt Sergeant Häberli had handed a rather long, narrow package to someone as she sauntered slowly past the partially open door to the men’s restroom.

Upon showing this to Tim and Jana, they each asked how she could be sure it was Klein receiving it, to which she had chuckled in an impish fashion. “While it is true we can’t see the whole person she’s handing that package to, the bare hand and wrist we can see tell me… and will tell the Spectre… all that’s required to convict our conspiratorial sergeant. Observe…”

So saying, Nina had her computer freeze the frame showing Häberli just releasing the package she was handing to the disembodied hand and arm visible outside the door frame. She placed an outline around that arm, then had the computer zoom in, until the only portion observable on the screen was the hand – gripping the long package still being held by Häberli – and the underside of the wrist. On that wrist was a prominently displayed tattoo, depicting a life-sized, blood-smeread straight-blade dagger, its point at the juncture of wrist and hand. “I do believe this tattoo belongs to Mr Klein, Jana. He had it applied before the war, when he still worked for the Illusive Man. I have faith it will still be on his forearm, proving Sergeant Häberli was complicit in the assassin’s attempt on Ambassador Hoffman’s life.”

“And in attempting to end the life of Zoë,” Jana added. “Well done. Document everything, Nina, but omit any reference to Atlas, and make sure your intrusion can not be back-traced to us. The Spectre does not need to reveal her sources to anyone, especially the commandant of that damned facility, and we must not draw any undue attention to our own organization if we wish to continue to be effective data miners working for Shepard.”

After a moment of silence, she continued, “Of course, we still need to discover who planted a blade in Frédéric Klein’s chest. I would almost bet that Häberli is the guilty party. Perhaps if the Spectre is
asking the questions, she’ll roll over on her patron… may even be able to give us the name of who paid her, and who paid Klein.”

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**T'Soni Country Estate, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 22 Oct 2188**

The Spectre team hadn’t left the estate since the party, but Livos – along with Shepard – had been busy with her regular home-station duties with the T'Soni Guard… all while Liara and Riana waded through the mountains of data being provided to them via any number of sources. Carlina still found it hard to believe that the unassuming Lady T'Soni was the Shadow Broker. Understanding that Livos needed space to do her job, Zan had kept busy during the day by embedding herself in one of the patrol squads; she wanted to see as much of the grounds of the immense estate as possible, and could think of no better way to cover the area quickly than to accompany a commando detachment.

The size of the Estate totally amazed her; she had known the T’Soni family was of high standing and rather influential, but had no idea as to the expanse of their holdings. What she found even more surprising was how the entire staff treated one another; while similar to the atmosphere of mutual respect she had experienced at the S’Vatyne Resort, the interactions here held a more personal touch… a real sense of family. *This could very easily become a second home to me.* She smiled softly, and a light blush crept up her neck as her mind continued down that path. *Or, perhaps, my primary home at some point in the future… should things with Liv go as I hope… no! As I expect they will go.*

Dayna Axessi caught the expression and grinned. “You must be thinking about what you’re planning for Captain Tanni when we get back this evening, Zan… and it must be good to make you blush so.”

Laughing, Carlina smiled. “Actually, I’m thinking much longer term than just this evening, Dayna. I was thinking about how easily I could find myself simply staying here… Already, you all feel like family to me; never in my life have I experienced such acceptance, except from Matriarch Marisha.” She huffed in disbelief. “It is amazing to me, how you all treat one another as true sisters.”

Dayna smiled wistfully and answered, “We have gone through some rather difficult times together. As commandos, the War bonded us like nothing else could. I suppose, in that respect, it had a good result… but we certainly suffered our share of losses. We lost our Matriarch, and close ai’a mes lost true sisters when all but one of Lady Benezia’s personal guard were killed… Nothing about that war can truly be considered good. Even so, now that is it over, many of us have discovered new sisters during the period of recovery… such as yourself, thanks to Captain Tanni.”

“Liv is dedicated.” Carlina’s face held an expression which could only be construed as apprehension. “And I thank the Goddess for whatever time she is willing to give to me. I cannot help but worry about the day she tells me she must focus once again on her duty to protect Lady Liara.”

“You are joking, right?” Dayna laughed aloud. “Sorry… I should not laugh, but you do not yet know Livos Tanni as well as all of us.” A broad smile spread across the commando’s face as she wrapped an arm around the shoulders of the nature guide and squeezed Zan tight. “Our captain is totally and everlastingly besotted with you. She would cut off her own arm before she would ever consider leaving you behind… for any reason.”

Zan looked at her in surprise and blurted, “But, even after knowing her for such a relatively short time, I can see her duty is her life! She is loyal to a fault!”
“Exactly! Loyal to a fault.” Dayna dropped her arm and grinned. “Which is exactly why you need to stop worrying. She’s declared herself to you, Zan… and unless you push her away, she’ll stand by you until the day she dies.”

“I don’t know how to respond to that, other than I suddenly desire this patrol to be done…” Zan’s face lit with a bashful smile as she continued, “With all of us back at the Estate, so I can go find her.”

The Team 2 lead, Lieutenant Arlis Tasia, chuckled behind them. “You heard our guide, commandos! Let’s step this up and make sure we’re back in time for dinner!”

Carlina’s face turned a deep purple, the white of her lightning bolts nearly glowing against her suddenly darker skin tone, as the group of six spread out and broke into a light run. Their pilot, Irlia T’Sasia, punched Zan lightly on the shoulder as she passed her by. “So, Sim’re… still glad you think of us all as sisters?”

Zan grinned and started jogging easily along with them as they moved at a good pace through the forest. “Oh yes. More so now than ever!”

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They arrived back at the Estate just before dinner, and with a smile for the group and a quick nod of acknowledgement toward Dayna, Carlina made a beeline toward the office of the Captain of the Estate Guard. As she burst in through the door with barely a knock, Livos’ head snapped up in surprise and she rose quickly to her feet. “Zan! Is everything alright? Did something happen with the patrol?”

“Everything and everyone are fine, Liv. Don’t worry yourself.” Without slowing down as she spoke, the guide moved quickly to her amantia and pushed her back to the wall with a passionate kiss. Caught off-guard, Liv initially resisted, placing her hands on Zan’s shoulders in an effort to hold her off… but the hunger in Zan’s expression quickly dispersed any trepidation and her hands shifted to Zan’s butt so she could pull her tight as she returned the kiss.

Once the heat diminished a bit, Zan pulled back just enough that she could speak, mumbling into Livos’ lips. “I love you, Livos Tanni, and have come to the realization that I need you in my life… as in my life every day.”

Livos eyes opened wide and her sable orbs met those of molten silver. “What, exactly, are you talking about, Zan?” Apprehension crept into her voice as she continued without pause, “I cannot imagine you leaving Sanves. You love your job and Matriarch Marisha is the mother you never truly had, so what are you thinking? You know I cannot… will not… leave my post with House T’Soni. I told you that when we met.”

“I know.” Zan gently stroked her fingertips across the side of Livos’ crest. “But I love you, Liv, with the entirety of my soul. I realize it’s crazy… that we have only had the week at Záhrada and, now, the two full days here, but my heart leaps with joy whenever I am with you and I see no reason whatsoever to deny ourselves such happiness. I simply know we are supposed to be together, so I am asking you to help me make this work.”

“Obviously, I would love to be with you on a more regular basis, Zan, so what do you need from me? My vacation time is relatively limited… we get one month’s time over the course of the year…”

Zan placed her fingers gently on Liv’s lips to silence the captain’s protest. “Do not stress over this; it’s not like Sanves is so terribly far away. So, I am confident that as long as you are willing, we will figure out a way.”
Livos smiled and hugged Zan tightly as she whispered, “You have no worries there, Zan. I am most definitely willing.”

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**Atlas Headquarters Personal Residences, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 22 Oct 2188**

Given the multitude of directions in which her people were being pulled because of their many avenues of investigation, Zoë invited her executive team members to dinner in order to speak with all of them in a more relaxed atmosphere, in an attempt at a collective ‘brainstorming’ session to figure out their next moves. Tim glanced around briefly before offering, “We’ve been looking at the treasure trove of information Douglas Walker provided to Sharon Culver; additionally, they gleaned a wealth of data from the servers aboard the *Valiant*… um, that’s the light corvette on which Walker intended to make his escape from Vancouver.”

Zoë cocked an eyebrow in Tim’s direction. “What kind of data are you talking about?”

Stafford’s bared his teeth in a predatory grin. “Locations for weapons caches, multiple safe houses in scattered Northwest locations, rally points… that ship had nearly everything *Eva’s Vortex* had… even a small number of 12.4 kg gold bars.”

After thinking about this for a few moments, Zoë observed, “I’m sure the Spectre has her analysts working on the data, but I would like for us to personally investigate a few of those safe houses.”

Looking at Jana, she said, “Contact Riana on the *Knight Shade*, early morning GST. I intend to send a couple of teams to investigate the safe houses closest to Vancouver.” Glancing down the table, she caught the eyes of Émiléda and Melina. “Depending on Shepard’s reply, we may discover something of great interest, or nothing at all.”

Jana nodded as she replied, “I’ll send the request along with my daily update… see what she says. I expect Culver will have her people investigating as well, but they’re a squad of six, so cannot possibly cover everything.”

“Her *personal* squad is only six… but do not forget she has the entirety of the Alliance Special Operations Division at her beck and call.” Zoë glanced around the table. “What else do we have? Any more ideas?”

Nina set her glass down as she looked first at Tim, then Zoë, and said, “I’ve narrowed my search down on the trail of credits between Charles Saracino and Frédéric Klein. Everything seems to funnel into and out of the central clearing accounts maintained by Terra Firma.” After taking another sip of wine, she added, “I’m hacking my way into those accounts; it’s a slow process, as I have to avoid leaving any evidence of my intrusion. It would seem the majority of the daily transactions in the accounts were accomplished through extranet access.”

Zoë grinned as she responded, “Good job, Nina. Upload everything you have to the secure server in time for me to include it in tomorrow’s morning report to the *Knight Shade*.” She rose from her chair long enough to pour herself a cup of coffee and bring it back to the table. Upon retaking her seat, she took a couple of sips of the very warm brew, then turned her attention to Stafford. “What more have you discovered about Hackett’s killer?”

“Owen Hamilton…” He said the name as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. “Bastard was a disgrace to the uniform! Unfortunately, I have been unable to discover any malice towards the late Admiral by Hamilton’s CO… a Sergeant Scholtz… he may have been totally blameless in all this. I *do* believe it will ultimately boil down to creds, as off-the-books transactions seem to have been driving the entire conspiracy.” With a shake of his head, he asked, “What CO in the course of their daily
activities would give any thought to the possibility of a person in uniform being willing to murder one of their own? Do you think it was a case of blind bad luck that Hamilton got the assignment?"

Zoë shook her head slightly as she blew air past her lips in response. “Pfft… Spectre Shepard told us she does not believe in coincidences, Tim, and I do not believe Hamilton’s assignment was simply the luck of the draw.” Her expression hardened slightly as she added, “Keep digging into Sergeant Scholtz’s background. He’s dirty… I can smell it. It’s the smell of credits… a lot of credits.”

With a heavy sigh, he replied, “I’ll keep digging into Scholtz. I actually do find it difficult to believe he was ignorant of Hamilton’s hatred of aliens and their so-called apologists… that kind of attitude is difficult to suppress.”

Zoë turned her attention to the Cousineau sisters. “Both of you comfortable with your assignments? Any questions?”

Émiléda answered for both, saying, “We’re all set, Ma’am.”

Melina added, “Should be a simple op, Ma’am. Even worrywart Boris doesn’t feel there’ll be any problems.”

Assuming Shepard’s approval of the operation, Émiléda would be traveling with Rich Clemons to one of the Terra Firma safe houses, east of Chilliwack, near the old Trans-Canada Highway; Melina would accompany Boris Sutton to an isolated house surrounded by dense forest southeast of South Surrey. Once each team determined the houses were unoccupied, they would carefully enter both in an attempt to determine if there was anything inside that could be exploited to bring Terra Firma down around Saracino’s head.

“Excellent… and he’s not a worrywart; he’s simply using what I consider the appropriate level of caution, given who we’re dealing with.” A slight smirk crossed her face as she looked around the table, standing as she said, “I’ve kept all of you long enough… everyone enjoy the rest of your evening.” With her smirk drawing into a straight line, she added, “This is not a competition, but if we can scoop up some data Shepard’s teams are unable to discover or obtain, that will go a long way towards proving Atlas is every bit as competent at data collection as T’Soni’s people. Just remember…” she paused to glance at Tim, “Whatever evidence we find has to be rock solid, or it’s worthless to Spectre Shepard. I will not offer her anything less than irrefutable data.”

Zoë’s parting words were, “Stay safe, all of you. Remember, we have to remain beneath notice by anyone, especially Alliance military personnel. Thank you all, and good luck.”

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Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 23 Oct 2188

Zoë Lawrence waited for the connection to the Knight Shade to complete, guessing that the longer than normal delay might be due to her own ID, rather than Jana’s, being sent with the request. When the signal was finally answered, an unhappy Riana Iregos glowered at her. “I had not expected to be conversing with you, Ms Lawrence. You must be calling to speak with my Captain… I have requested her presence here and expect her to arrive momentarily.”

Zoë nodded her head; before Riana could place the call on standby, she spoke up. “I know you have a problem with my continued existence, Ms Iregos… and I want you to know I understand, but… I would also like for you to be aware that all the lives I have ended weigh heavily on my conscience. Each and every one. I cannot bring them back and, truthfully, the galaxy would most likely not wish for most of them to return.”

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Zoë looked down for a moment, allowing Riana an opening. “Why are you telling me this? You have adopted a new persona, have permanently camouflaged your face, yet deep down inside, you are still Maya Brooks, and will always remain so to me. If those deaths truly weighed upon your conscience, you would have turned yourself in to the proper authorities.” Riana looked to her side briefly, then returned her gaze to Zoë. “Know that I do not believe you; neither will I ever forget nor forgive any of your many crimes, Ms Brooks. Good bye.”

Riana stepped out of camera range, to be replaced by Spectre Shepard. “My apologies for my delay in arriving, Zoë. It sounds as if speaking to Riana did not go well?”

Zoë shook her head slightly, saying, “I told her I understand her antipathy towards me, Spectre. I am increasingly regretting the events of my previous life yet am unable to do a damned thing to negate them… and ‘turning myself into the authorities’ as Riana suggests would eliminate any hope I have of eventual redemption.” Taking a deep breath to calm the emotions brought up by her exchange with the huntress, she got down to business. “Anyway, we have the proof you require to detain and question Sergeant Häberli, Shepard.” Queuing the files, she pressed SEND as she added, “She’s a disgrace to the uniform, Spectre, and there should be more than enough data on that file to detain and interrogate her. Based on Tim’s experience with her, I believe Häberli will cave in to minimal pressure and give up her handler on that base. Once you have that name, we should be able to find the exchange identifier and follow the trail of credits, as Häberli received a generous payday for her part in all this. It would be a gross injustice if she has the freedom to enjoy it.”

Shepard had taken a quick look at the data Atlas had transmitted. With a small grin, she commented, “Looks like I have the right people working for me on Earth, Zoë. I’ll pass this off to Colonel Culver in Special Operations for the arrest and interrogation. Keep on digging… and thank you for what you’ve turned up so far.”

Zoë smiled at that, and ended with, “By the way? Congratulations on your successful bid for Asari citizenship, Shepard. You have my sincere best wishes for a long and happy future on Thessia.”

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Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 23 Oct 2188

Sharon was smiling as she picked up the call. “Shepard. Long time no chat. Everything good? How’s Liara?”

“Everything is good and Liara is great, Sharon.” Samantha grinned at the Special Ops commander. “And, unless you’ve been comm out, I’m sure you’ve heard my petition was accepted… seeing as it’s been all over the news.”

“I hope you’re not actually listening to that drivel, Shep.” Sharon frowned. “Those damned reporters are doing nothing but trying to stir up enough shit to make a story out of what should be your personal business. I wish I could arrest them all for sedition and call it a wrap.”

Laughing, Shepard responded, “Not worth your time, Sharon… but I do have something for you that I believe will be.”

“Oh, yeah?” Sharon sat up and leaned forward. “What’s that?”

The colonel’s eyes narrowed as Shepard explained what she had in her possession. “Riana is sending the data file and security footage as we speak. Walker’s capture turned up a lot of info on Cerberus tech and data caches, but this one? This involves a Marine Sergeant named Diane Häberli, stationed at the headquarters in Vancouver; she may very well be the key to the leadership of our
“If you’re positive, I’m on it, Shep. As soon as we disconnect, I’ll get a team on their way to arrest her, based on your word. Then, I’ll download the info pack and, once I have her in detention, question her based on what I find in the text and vid files. If she’s the key, I’ll find the door it belongs to, of that you can be certain.”

“We wouldn’t be speaking unless Liara had vetted the data… or if we had any doubt in your abilities to get the job done.” Shepard had a gleam in her eye and a growl in her voice as she added, “And Sharon? Don’t try to save the door. Kick it in and burn the damned house down, Colonel. Spectre authority.”

“You sure about that?” Culver knew the answer, but felt the need to have it verbally confirmed, which Shepard did without hesitation.

“Abso-fucking-lutely.”

Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 23 Oct 2188

Tim Stafford thanked his escort as he was shown into a small, austere office and introduced to a woman that had obviously spent her entire adult life wearing a military uniform. Colonel Sharon Culver looked up from the data pad at which she was frowning; a slight smile lifted the corners of her mouth as she stood and reached across her desk to grasp the hand Tim offered. “Mr Stafford, I presume. Pleased to meet you.”

Releasing his hand after pumping it only once, she immediately got to the business at hand, indicating the data pad in her left hand. “Spectre Shepard vouched for you… said you were less than impressed with the attitude you encountered while a guest of the Alliance.” Waving her hand at the chair beside her desk, she retook her own chair and looked at Tim expectantly as he sat down with a sigh.

With a tight smile, Tim explained, “As I told the Spectre, it was obvious to me when I met Sergeant Häberli that she was unquestionably disappointed with the outcome of the assassination plot; it seemed she wished to blame me for the failure of the conspiracy to eliminate all four targets. It was also quite obvious she was dissatisfied with my total silence when she tried to grill me for answers concerning my reasons for attending the ceremony with forged credentials.”

“How were you treated once you were taken into custody?”

Tim chuckled as he replied, “Almost as if I was one of the assassins. Nothing physical, which surprised me. I actually expected her to personally conduct a complete strip search before placing me in a cell.” After pausing briefly to gather his thoughts, he looked straight into Culver’s eyes as he continued, “I don’t believe she’s near as tough as she presents herself to be, Colonel. She gave up way too easily during my interrogation; she simply doesn’t have it in her. She’s a desk jockey. I seriously doubt she’s ever seen combat, and I honestly believe that if you apply the right sort of mental pressure, she’ll roll over and sing an aria.”

Culver showed her teeth in a humorless grin. “I’ll settle for names, actually… and just what sort of mental pressure are you suggesting, Mr Stafford?” Upon hearing his answer, she sat back in her chair as she thought about his idea. After several minutes of contemplative silence, she returned her gaze to the Atlas agent, saying, “Okay. Here’s what you’re going to do for me…”
Sharon was smiling menacingly as she strolled into the interrogation room. “Diane Häberli. Are you aware of just how deep the pile of Pyjak shit you chose to wade through happens to be?”

When she was met by silence, Culver shrugged and opened the data pad she held in her hand. “Harassment. Conspiracy. Harboring a fugitive.” She watched the prisoner out of the corner of her eye, enjoying the subtle changes in her expression as she read through the list of charges. “Sedition. Accessory to attempted murder and accessory to murder in the first. Treason.” Here, Culver paused and whistled. “Oooh, boy! That last one is punishable by death… ouch! Nice collection you’ve got going there, traitor.”

She tossed the pad onto the table; the clattering sound surprised Häberli, causing her to jerk in her seat. Sullen eyes looked up at her angrily as Sharon observed, “That bright orange jumpsuit flatters you, Häberli; I’m glad someone thought to strip you of your uniform before I arrived, because you certainly don’t deserve to wear it.” Culver leaned forward until she was within a few centimeters of the woman’s face, softly adding, “You should have used Klein’s blade like Hamilton used his pistol… to end your own life… because there is nothing but suffering ahead for you now, you disloyal bitch.”

With her hands securely cuffed behind her back, Häberli thrust her head forward in an attempt to head-butt this insufferable colonel, but Culver was ready for it, pulling her own head back as she brought an open hand around to slam Häberli on the side of her head. As the woman howled in pain, Sharon reached out, grabbed her by the collar, and yanked her roughly back upright in her chair. “Shut the fuck up. I have Spectre Shepard covering my six on this one, you sniveling little piece of shit. I can do anything I damn well please to you… I can even kill you, if I wish. Believe me when I say ending your life would be much too generous for the likes of you.”

Shoving the traitor roughly against the back of her chair, Culver stepped back and opened the door. “Mr Stafford? The prisoner is ready to be searched, Sir.”

The expression on Häberli’s face shifted rapidly from pained anger to fearful dread as she recognized the man sauntering into the room. Tim grinned as he crouched in front of and to one side of the chair in which the woman was sitting. “I see you remember me from our little meeting on the 29th of September, Diane. I must say, I never expected to be seeing you again so soon.” Her only response was to turn her head away, as if he wasn’t in the room.

Standing again, Tim produced a pair of medical examination gloves from a pocket; he casually pulled them on, then smirked at the woman as he ordered, “Stand up, Marine.” When it became obvious she wasn’t going to comply, Culver showed her teeth in a malevolent grin and motioned to Cliff and Letisha, members of Spec Ops 1, to assist. The pair stepped up behind Häberli on either side; as it was abundantly clear the woman was going to make them do this the hard way, they each grabbed her under an upper arm and roughly stood her up from the chair.

Once the sergeant was on her feet, she looked at Tim and began protesting – loudly. “You cannot do this, Colonel! No matter what crimes I’ve been charged with, I haven’t been declared guilty by a court martial! This man isn’t even an Alliance soldier; if I’m to be searched again, I demand to be searched by a woman!”

Culver smirked as she said, “Do you, now? Do you not understand what Spectre authority means? You and your cohorts have been classified as terrorists, Häberli; there will be no courts-martial, I’m afraid… not for you, or any of the many other Alliance personnel obviously involved in this assassination plot. Besides, I happen to know that Mr Stafford here is simply returning the favor; you should be thanking me… because if you insist that I perform the search, I’ll strip you down in
“He was scanned with an omnitool!” Häberli’s eyes widened in what could only be described as fearful apprehension. “I never touched him, and I certainly didn’t strip him!”

“And that’s a good thing, else we could add assault to the list of charges.” With a huff of disgust, she nodded at Tim. “You may proceed, Sir.”

Stafford shrugged his shoulders, smiled and moved to stand behind her; placing his hands on her shoulders, he used a foot to kick her feet further apart as he’d been instructed by Culver, then slid both hands down each of her arms in turn before patting down her back, then each side of her torso, making sure to cover every centimeter. Although she remained quiet, he could feel her body stiffen in response to his fingertips sliding past the sides of her breasts. After gliding his hands firmly across both sides of her butt, including the space in the middle and the creases at the tops of her thighs, he ran both hands down the outside of each leg from her butt to her ankles. He then came back up, hands on the insides of her legs, and whispered, “Can’t wait to repeat this from the front side.”

As he shoved a hand between the crux of her legs at her crotch, Häberli reached her breaking point, hollering, “Stop! Enough!”

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Tim paused, giving Häberli little reprieve as he stood, positioned his hands to the sides of her hips, and awaited Culver’s decision, who simply asked, “You have something to tell us, traitor?” Tim could feel the woman trembling under his palms but had no way to tell if it was in anger or humiliation… or a combination of the two.

Diane’s voice was choked with resentment as she struggled to answer. “This isn’t right, Colonel… it’s just not right,” she sobbed, angry tears running down her cheeks. “Ask your questions… I’ll tell you what I know. I’d rather go to prison for life than have this bastard’s hands on my chest or… in my crotch.”

Tim, still standing behind the sergeant, smiled grimly as he removed his hands from her hips and took a step back; Culver nodded to Cliff and Letisha to return her to the chair, which they did promptly, with no thoughts toward comfort. “You should be glad I’m feeling charitable today, Häberli… Given what you’ve done, I should have let him strip search you.”

Tim stepped around the chair and paused to look scathingly at Häberli. “I wish I could say it’s been a pleasure, Diane, but I guess today isn’t my day for justice. Though… I think I’ll hang around a bit… That way, if you change your mind about cooperating, I’ll get another chance at you… another chance to level the scales a bit more for Admiral Hackett and Prime Minister Trost.” The look of utter loathing he received as he sauntered out of the interrogation room made the trip here from Atlas headquarters totally worth it.

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Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large – 24 Oct 2188

Commander Williams had been walking the ship, visiting with and talking to the crew, more in an attempt to keep herself occupied during an extremely boring assignment than for socializing. She was on the bridge, chatting with Edi and Joker when he held up a hand. After a few moments, he began caressing haptic controls as he said, “The relay just began pivoting, Commander. Give me a few moments…”

The flight lieutenant’s fingers played among several interfaces; after studying the results of his queries, he half-turned his chair, so he could look at Ashley as he reported, “Relay is realigning to
receive a vessel from Omega, Ma’am. All the sensor data being received is being recorded, and we’re in perfect position to obtain good quality vids of whatever ship emerges from FTL.” Before she could ask, Joker added, “We’re well clear of any exit vector a ship might need to use for travel… if it’s the Nalotir and it’s headed where we think, they’ll have to make a turn to starboard after clearing the relay, which should put them on a course directly away from us.”

“Thanks, Joker. That’s exactly what I needed to hear. How much time?”

“Approximate alignment time will be twenty-five to thirty minutes.”

Ashley set a countdown timer on her omnitool as she turned and walked back to the CIC to talk to Rensch.
The Dominoes Fall

Chapter Notes

CIC - Combat Information Center

OPSEC - Operations security

OSD - Optical Storage Device

Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Normandy SR2, Phoenix Massing, At Large – 24 Oct 2188

Lieutenant Commander Rensch and Commander Williams had just completed updating their status reports concerning the rebellious Quarian fleet when they received a five-minute warning call from the bridge. “Relay alignment 98 percent complete, Commander. Standing by.”

Ashley acknowledged Edi’s warning before telling her XO, “Looks like we’re as ready as we can be, LC. If we can pull this off, we’ll have a much easier time tracking the Nalotir or any other ship capable of cloaking. Be ready.” The Spectre turned and strode past the galaxy map display on her way to the bridge; she wanted to personally view the ship or ships about to exit the space-time corridor from Sahrabarik.

Upon entering the control deck, she stepped to the right in order to stand behind Edi’s chair. She had no need to check the countdown timer on her omnitool; the increasing rotational velocity of the gigantic containment rings and the growing intensity of the massive Eezo core – magnetically suspended within the paired rings – confirmed the relay’s realignment as complete. Once the intense blue glow had increased to a white-hot brilliance, blue-white ribbons of raw, dark energy surrounded and caressed the ancient structure for several moments before abruptly reaching off into a seemingly infinite distance – there to engulf an imperceptible speck that instantly grew in size as it approached and quickly decelerated from FTL to a seeming standstill beside the rapidly spinning containment rings.

Continuing to move past the control section of the relay, the Normandy’s passive scans identified the vessel as the Nalotir. “Gotcha,” muttered Ashley, watching through the forward viewports. As the Quarian ship began its turn to cross beyond the relay, its structure appeared to blur for just a moment before it faded completely from view. “I’ll be damned… they really do possess the technology.”

Edi had been working through a series of haptic control panels from the time the Nalotir had appeared; she entered her final command, then inclined her head to look at Ashley as she turned her chair towards the center aisle. “Now that I know what to look for, we can track that ship just as well as if it were visible. The cloaking device they employ is actually a form of shielding… using a series of electro-magnetically stimulated prisms on the hull to… bend… reflected light, effectively rendering the ship invisible to the naked eye. However, the light-bending effects can camouflage neither their heat emissions, nor the rippling void created by the ship’s presence in the vacuum of space. They seem to possess extremely efficient exhaust coolers, and they probably use rather massive internal heat sinks to absorb excess heat while they’re so camouflaged; this is not unlike our
own onboard stealth systems. That said, the ship’s thrusters are still hot; I am now scanning in the infrared wavelengths.”

Joker split his attention between Edi and his captain while quietly monitoring the Nalotir’s departure vector. “Ma’am? Should we follow?”

For the first time, Ashley truly understood why the Normandy had originally been designated as a scout flotilla asset, rather than a war frigate. As the sole vessel in her class, the ship’s technology would have been a huge advantage for stealth monitoring of space forces… and a chill ran down Ashley’s spine as she realized former Admiral Mikhailovich could have used the Normandy to monitor any forces… not necessarily just those of the enemy. She nodded as she shifted her attention to the Flight Lieutenant. “Set your course and begin following, Joker… no closer than the far range of our scanners; implement our silent running protocol… I don’t want them to detect us, and I certainly don’t want them to discover we can track them.”

“You got it, Ma’am,” came the response. He began entering commands into a multitude of Haptic interfaces, quickly pulling them up and just as quickly dismissing them. The frigate responded by smoothly moving to follow the path of the Quarian ship.

Atlas Headquarters, Vancouver B.C., Earth – 24 Oct 2188

“She what!” Valérie Corbett reacted to the information bomb Zoë had just dropped on everyone in attendance.

Zoë, sitting at the end of the conference table, smirked as she said, “She folded like a house of cards, Valérie. According to Tim, after his incomplete physical search shook Häberli up so badly, the colonel played her like a trout. By the time Culver was done, that damned traitor would have offered her own mother up as a Batarian slave.”

“There’s a reason Colonel Culver was selected as the Spec Ops lead, that’s for sure; she’s excellent at what she does.” Stafford leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms and said, “Gave us an entirely new avenue to pursue. Häberli received her marching orders from Marine Master Sergeant Matthias Scholtz. It appears that Scholtz really is all kinds of dirty, Jana. You’ll remember he was responsible for assigning Corporal Owen Hamilton as Hackett’s escort.” Tim looked down at the data pad he was using; after scrolling through a bit of the information, he added, “Before today, I wasn’t sure that Scholtz was holding Häberli’s leash, but after listening to Häberli singing like a damned canary, there’s no longer any room for doubt.”

Zoë’s mouth was set in a straight, grim line as she nodded before saying, “Apparently, Scholtz answers to an Earth-based Navy commander, name of Seth McKay. Tim, work with Valérie… find out everything you can regarding the possible identity of McKay’s handler… he has to be getting his marching orders from someone higher up the chain. Whoever it is, they’re all dirty… and I’ll bet every credit I possess that Shepard doesn’t want us to give up on the hunt until we reach the very peak of the pyramid.” Zoë’s eyes flashed with barely controlled anger. “We haven’t reached the top yet, folks, though I honestly believe Shepard will cut us a bit more slack from here on out, since we were able to prove Häberli’s role in this conspiracy. All we need to do now is identify their leader; giving that name to the Spectre should buy us a bit more grace.”

Shadow Broker Vessel Chiroquol, At Large – 25 Oct 2188
Barla Von, like most members of the Volus race, was a meticulous researcher; having a background as a financial advisor plying his trade on the Citadel before the Reaper War, he had been quite adept at moving large sums of credits without leaving a data trail. The experience gained in the Financial District of the Presidium now served him well as he painstakingly hunted for the inexorable trails left by numerous transactions initiated to pay for the assassinations of four high-ranking Humans during the rededication of the Alliance headquarters in Vancouver.

He had already made excellent progress in identifying some of the multiple sources of the extravagant payments made to Walker and Klein for their parts in the conspiracy but had hit a wall… around which he had yet to find a way forward. With the added details from the investigative financial report from Atlas, forwarded to him by Riana Iregos, the rotund Volus finally found the crack in their cover trail. The unnamed Atlas researcher had been exceedingly thorough; a portion of Klein’s credit could be proved as having been dispersed by Seth McKay… who, in turn, had received an unusually large stipend from Charles Saracino. Although this was very likely the link that Spectre Shepard was looking for, Barla Von felt he required more substantial evidence before presenting the information as fact. Besides… that’s only a part of the payment. The question now is where the rest came from.

Thanks to the Alliance Special Operations’ discoveries, the Volus was also closing in on whoever had paid Douglas Walker for his services. As Walker was in custody and Klein was dead, it would be a relatively simple matter to have Shepard issue a confiscation order for the funds. The Volus thought it highly ironic that, as highly successful as both men were at their craft, neither had succeeded in their individual attempts to kill two highly placed Alliance officials. That’s it! came the thought. Neither succeeded. In all likelihood, they would have been expecting a completion bonus. Those credits would have been electronically sent to a holding account… an account that should now be empty. Those funds can be traced back to their source when the accounts are credited! The Volus went back to work with a renewed sense of purpose… and direction.

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Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 26 Oct 2188

Colonel Culver glowered as she disconnected the second call from her friend regarding the assassination plot; she was beginning to seriously wonder if her entire career had been wasted, unknowingly spending her lifetime serving xenophobes and megalomaniacs. “What the fuck is going on?” she asked the empty space around her. “How are these people even in the Alliance?”

She shook her head as she stood from her desk, knowing the answer to the questions she had asked of no one in particular. Because they are being misguided and protected by someone higher than them in the chain. Scoffing in disgust, she opened a comm link on her omnitool. “Blaze, prep the team; we’re headed back to Vancouver to pick up another one…"

A somewhat surprised voice answered back, “We?”

“Yes, we.” Sharon snatched up her deployment bag as she waited for her office door to slide open; she was through and starting to stride purposefully toward the docks before the door had completely retracted, much less closed behind her. “I’ll fill you in once we get underway.”

Once the team was on the Kodiak and they were airborne, Sharon explained what they were doing. “Once we get Commander McKay locked down, Shepard will meet us at the training center… in the interrogations rooms.”

“But this is anything but training.” Blaze’s voice held unchecked contempt. “These treasonous bastards accepted money for murder… so why in Hell does it take a Spectre to ferret them out and
keep them in check? Just what on earth is our senior command doing?”

“Still reeling from the Reaper War, ongoing recovery efforts, and assassinations.” Culver shrugged her shoulders and continued, “Even I find it hard to believe this conspiracy involves so many people in the Headquarters. I think we’ve simply had our heads buried in the sand, Blaze… relieved the Reaper War is over, glad the Illusive Man is now a dead madman with no surviving indoctrinated soldiers, and trying to convince ourselves that LEAP is just a fringe organization with a few radical fanatics. We’ve been focused on rebuilding… all while being completely blind to the people who are trying to tear us apart from within.”

“So, with the help of Spectre Shepard, we’re gonna fix it. Right, Ma’am?” Lieutenant Bewick growled, “Though, I think it would be a lot easier if you just let me plink him; eye for an eye, from 1000 meters.”

The surveillance expert, Specialist Cliff Etulain, chuckled at the idea. “That’d be really sweet… especially if you use one of your explosive rounds… but kind of hard to ask him questions after that. And, I’m pretty sure there’s nothing about McKay that screams he’s the big honcho of this operation.”

“You’ve got that right, Cliff,” Culver chuckled in response. “So, we’re going to find out just who in Hell is.”

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Vancouver, Earth, Sol – 26 Oct 2188

Culver and Blaze caught up to McKay just as he arrived home from work and opened his front door. He greeted the unknown Marines with caution. “Colonel? What can I do for you?”

“Name’s Sharon Culver, commander of Special Ops, and I need to speak with you privately… and we need to get you off the street. Can we step inside please?”

McKay was both surprised and wary. “What do you mean ‘off the street’?”

“I mean that quite literally.” Culver shoved him backwards through the doorway into his home and followed him in, Blaze trailing behind and closing the door after he entered. Sharon spoke quickly. “We have received what we consider to be a valid threat on your life, Commander. Given recent events, we decided to err on the side of caution. Do you have any meetings or appointments coming up in the next couple days? Anything that could expose you to people outside of Alliance command? People you wouldn’t normally be in contact with?”

“No, no one that I can think of.” McKay’s wariness shifted to concern. “Is that important?”

“Well, crap.” Culver glanced at her team lead. “If Commander McKay isn’t going out, the assassin is probably planning on coming here.”

“What information, exactly, do you have?” McKay looked at the colonel as if she had gone mad. “Who in Hell would want to kill me?”

“That’s why we’re here… because I don’t know who wants you dead, and we need to sit down and figure it out, preferably before they manage to get to you.” Culver’s brow furrowed as she continued, “Someone has a problem with your section, Commander, and is working their way up the chain… It all started after Klein was found murdered in his bed, in a secure room in the hospital.” The colonel shrugged, doing her best to look bewildered. “After that, Sergeant Diane Häberli disappeared first, and then Master Sergeant Matthias Scholtz… both simply vanished over the
weekend. So, we’re here to make sure the same doesn’t happen to you.”

“Diane and Matt are missing?”

“You didn’t see them at work today, did you?” Culver frowned. “Don’t you check up on your troops?”

“Of course, I do!” McKay responded, defensively. “But I also trust them, so I don’t keep tabs on their every movement. I just assumed they had tasks outside the office today.”

Culver opened her omnitool and began to scan the room. McKay immediately questioned, “What are you doing?”

“Checking to see if your home is under any type of surveillance.” Detecting no signals, she approached the commander. “You, however, have a personal tracker in your chrono. Do you not realize how easily you can be located through that device?”

“Well, yeah, but…” McKay’s answer was abruptly cut off by the crack of weapon’s fire echoing through the room, as a window beside the commander shattered in response to a sliver of metal that whistled past his head by mere centimeters, before burying itself in the nearby wall.

On instinct, everyone in the room ducked down and sought cover. Culver immediately shouted out, “Blaze, drop the blinds and kill the lights!”

He responded instantly and crawled across the floor to Culver’s side. “The team reported in, Ma’am. They have pinpointed the source direction… Authorized to pursue?”

Culver growled, “No. As much as I’d like to find the fucker, our top priority is McKay’s safety.” She glanced at the anxious commander. “We can’t protect you here… We need to move you to a secure facility… Now.”

“Right.” McKay’s eyes were wide. “But I need to make a call first…”

“Not a chance, Commander.” Culver shook her head. “Drop your chrono and omnitool, so you can’t be electronically traced or tracked. We’ll get you access to secure comms once we have you tucked away from whoever is trying to kill you. We make you safe first… then you’ll be alive to make your calls… Understood?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he answered as he deactivated his omnitool and removed both it and his chrono from his wrists. Reaching up to slide them onto a small table near the couch, he muttered “This situation is beyond bizarre! I honestly have no idea who would want me dead!”

“Time to talk about that later, Commander.” She turned her head. “Blaze… Let’s move.”

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It had all been carefully planned; Culver, with a five-person team including herself, quickly smuggled McKay to their waiting transport and took off, supposedly to safety. The squad’s hacking and infiltration specialist, Engineer Rudolf ‘Fortune’ Fortunato, stayed behind and worked his way through the commander’s apartment looking for evidence of past and potential future activities, while Specialist Monte ‘Ringer’ Mehringer, a close-combat specialist and the squad’s back-up sniper, maintained a watch to ensure they were not discovered. Fortune grinned as they entered the apartment. “Nice shot, but did you have to shatter the window? Makes it a bit more difficult to sweep the scene.”
“Not my fault the dirtbag lives in a cheap apartment without security webbed windows!” Ringer smiled in return. “He’s lucky I checked that out before I pulled the trigger. I didn’t expect the glass to stop the shot, so made sure to aim left. Besides, it’s not like you need to worry about it anyway. I’ll call the glass dimensions into the cleaners and it’ll be replaced quick enough… maybe even before you’re done.”

Fortune was done in less than ten minutes, time enough for Ringer to make the necessary call, clean up the shards of glass, and make a perfunctory search of McKay’s personal belongings, but little else. As they left, locking the apartment on their way out, the hacker whispered, “The Alliance really needs to do a better job training its officers in OPSEC. This guy didn’t even have basic encryption on his files… any of them!… or on his damned omnitool!”

Moving quickly via dark, back alleys, Cliff asked, “So, did you find anything good?”

“Oh, there’s all kinds of shit. Messages between a number of other Alliance personnel… it will be fun sorting through all that crap and figuring out which were official duty stuff and those that weren’t… and lots of other stuff. The best download will probably be the batch file of banking records; money trails never lie.”

“So, we get to nail McKay to the wall?” Cliff grinned, white teeth flashing briefly in the darkening fall twilight.

“Oh yeah… and a number of other folks as well, if intuition serves. This one guy is gonna crash their entire network. The info trail he left behind is big enough for a blind Vorcha to follow! We’ll certainly be able to follow it; this group is going down!”

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T'Soni Country Estate, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 26 Oct 2188

Shepard had just snuggled in behind Liara when her omnitool chirped with an incoming call. Liara mumbled grumpily as her bondmate rolled over to see who could possibly be calling at this late hour. Upon recognizing the ident code, the Spectre bolted upright in the bed. “Sharon! What do you have for me?”

Immediately awake with the mention of the name, Liara quickly sat up and peered over Shepard’s shoulder, answering for the Special Operations commander with a spot-on declarative statement. “You already have McKay in custody, don’t you.”

“Correct as always, Liara,” Sharon chuckled softly. “Sorry to disturb your rest.”

Liara turned away to roll off the opposite side of the bed, speaking loud enough for Sharon to still hear. “Quite alright. It will be good to have this entire matter resolved; our rest hasn’t exactly been peaceful, knowing those murderers and conspirators are still roaming free.”

Culver’s jovial mood vanished as she answered, “That’s a true assessment, for sure… not only for you two. A lot of us have been losing sleep over this mess, but I do believe we are very close to wrapping this up.”

Shepard was all business as she hung her feet off the side of the bed. “So, what do we have?”

“We have a very confused commander sitting in a sound-proofed Safe Room, thinking someone is trying to kill him.” Culver smirked as she continued, “I imagine, by the time you get here, he’ll have figured out he’s been had… and his confusion will have turned into angry indignation. Please, go back to bed and enjoy your night’s sleep, then come in the morning when you’re good and ready. I
want McKay to sit and stew; he’s going to be mighty pissed off when he figures out the promised communications access isn’t happening. I want him waiting long enough for the simmer to turn to a full boil. It just might make him say something stupid.”

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Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 26 Oct 2188

It had been over five years since then newly-promoted Commander Seth McKay had recited an oath that stated, in part, that he would ‘… support and defend the regulations and accords of the Systems Alliance against all enemies.’ His thoughts went back briefly to that time as he waited for an escort to whatever passed for a secure communications center here… wherever this was… so he could contact Captain Bruce Mitchell on the heavy cruiser SSV Madrid. Have to warn him that the hounds have been loosed… let him know people are vanishing and everything is unraveling.

McKay, inside a locked room – ‘for your own safety’ he’d been told – by turns sat in the one comfortable chair in the room and paced around it in an endless circle as he slowly came to believe the promise of access to a comms system had been a fabrication in order to gain his unresisting cooperation. The realization that he’d been played hit him hard. That bitch lied to me! That miserable fuckin’ whore lied to me!

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Special Operations Center, Earth, Sol – 27 Oct 2188

“Shep!” Shepard’s face wore a broad grin as she walked into Culver’s office, the Colonel jumping from her chair to wrap the arriving Spectre in a warm hug as she continued, “Damned good to see you. I knew you’d get here as fast as you could this morning. Did you even sleep?”

“Like I didn’t have a care in the galaxy, Sharon,” came the smiling reply. Stepping back from the hug, she added, “But I was raring to go the minute I woke this morning, that’s for sure. What do you have for us?”

Ignoring the question for a moment, Sharon sidestepped the Spectre and hugged Liara in welcome. “Good to see you too, Li. I can only hope the next time we get together will be for something fun.”

“Yes, I agree. It would be nice to simply get together as friends… family… instead of for business.” Liara smiled softly. “We need to make a point of it.”

“Agreed.” Sharon glanced back to Shepard and finally answered her. “Now, as for your question… McKay’s concept of security thankfully needs a whole lot of work, so we have more information than we could have ever hoped.” Handing over a data pad, she continued, “This is a summary of everything Fortune dug up. Didn’t even take him long since none of it was encrypted. McKay must not have believed anyone would track him home and dig into his private equipment.” She shook her head and snorted in disgust, “Idiot.”

“Or, he simply believed whoever he’s working for would protect him.” Shepard raised her eyebrows as she glanced quickly through the information, her thoughts bleeding through the link garnering an angry retort from Liara.

“Bruce Mitchell?” the Asari growled. “As in the ‘executive officer of the SSV Madrid under Captain Jessica Mikhailovich’ Mitchell?”

“Easy, Blue.” Shepard reached over and placed her hand over a clenched fist beginning to shed
wisps of biotics. “It doesn’t surprise me in the least that the followers of the Mikhailovich clan are mixed up in all this. In fact, I rather like it.”

“What?” Liara looked at her siame in vexation, her voice squeaking as she said, “They were responsible for killing you, Shepard! What in blue blazes is there to like about any of this?”

Shepard squeezed her hand softly and answered, “Because this allows us to clean up more than just one mess… We’re getting at least two for the price of one, here.”

“Or not.” Culver shook her head. “Could be it’s all been related from the start. My guess is Admiral Mikhailovich was part of this from the very beginning. You two have been a pain in their collective asses more than a few times over the course of their attempts to establish Human dominance over the galaxy.”

“You think he was associated with the Illusive Man?” Shepard’s eyes opened wide as the implication of Sharon’s words became clear.

“Keep reading over that data, Shep.” Culver nodded at the pad still in the Spectre’s hand. “The farther back in time you go, the more obvious it becomes. McKay was initially receiving orders from Admiral Mikhailovich. Even though Cerberus was never directly mentioned, he does talk about a man named Harper having a crystal-clear vision for the future of Humanity.”

“Well, fuck me.” Shepard said softly as she glanced at Liara. “Do you think they knew Jack Harper and the Illusive Man were one and the same?”

Liara shrugged. “I have no idea… but I cannot imagine that they did not.”

“I want you to scan through this before I go in.” Shepard handed her bondmate the data pad. “That way, you can look up specifics as I question McKay. I want him to think I’ve been studying this data for a long time… like none of it is a surprise to me.” Sharon looked a bit confused, so the Spectre elaborated, “There’s no way I can memorize that much information fast enough… but Liara can provide me details through the link.” She grinned at her bondmate and added, “It’s a huge advantage, since most don’t understand the nature of the bond we have.”

Understanding lit up Culver’s face. “I can imagine.” Glancing at Liara, she smiled. “There’s no rush… the longer McKay waits, the better, as far as I’m concerned. Just let me know when you’re ready to start.”

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Shepard and Culver stepped into the room; before he ever said a word, the expression on McKay’s face told them he was none too pleased to see the Spectre enter along with the Colonel. “I guess the promise of access to secure comm was nothing but Pyjak shit, huh?” McKay’s face held a derisive sneer as he added, “As for you, I should have known you had something to do with this… Spectre… because nothing about this is legal.”

“You’re right,” Shepard chuckled, irritating McKay even more. “Especially your cooperation with Captain Mitchell and, by extension, Charles Saracino, in your attempt to eliminate the Systems Alliance leadership through assassination.” With immense satisfaction, she watched the flash of surprised concern cross the man’s face.

“What?” he blurted. “Are you out of your mind?” He shook his head in denial as he continued, “I’m a loyalist! I’ve supported the Systems Alliance my entire career… fought in the war… damned lucky to survive, if you ask me!”
“And the only reason any of us survived was Fleet Admiral Steven Hackett’s leadership…” Shepard closed on the man, fists glowing blue, but she restrained herself as she growled, “And you repaid him by killing him, you worthless son of a bitch!”

McKay honestly thought he was going to get warped into oblivion and backed away quickly, cowering with a hand held up as a useless shield if Shepard was unable to contain herself. Once he realized she wasn’t going to turn him into a smudge on the wall, he rediscovered his backbone, dropped his hand and straightened back up, glaring at her as he brazenly stated, “You’ve got no proof of your slander, Shepard, so why don’t you shut the fuck up and give me my phone call.”

At that, Culver laughed. “Oh! My! God! Do you honestly think we would take you into custody without full knowledge of your actions and proof of what you’ve done? You really are daft, aren’t you?” She glanced at Shepard in disbelief before looking back at McKay. “Häberli told us most everything we needed to know. We just needed your info to tie up a few loose ends!”

At this point, Liara sent a quick prod through the link and Shepard echoed the information she provided. “I know it all started with a personal message from you to then-Commander Mitchell, congratulating him on his upcoming promotion but lamenting the reasons.” Shepard sneered as McKay’s eyes clouded with worry once more, and continued, “I’ve read a copy of it… should I quote it?”

McKay’s face paled and he visibly deflated as Shepard, not bothering to wait for a response, repeated the words rolling through her mind from Liara. “It’s a shame the woman who managed to rid us of that alien-lover as Humanity’s representative to the galaxy had to lose her job in order for you to get your first command. You deserve every bit of it, but Jessica is a good woman and deserves thanks for her dedication to the cause instead of the loss of her position and rank within the Systems Alliance Navy.”

Sharon quickly added, “And Mitchell’s response… the assurance that Jessica’s position within the movement was safe, along with inviting you to the next meeting of LEAP, next time you were home?” She scoffed in disgust. “That message sanctioned Mikhailovich’s abandonment of Shepard to the ice of Alchera… Too bad for you, she didn’t actually perish in that attack.”

“Fuck you.” McKay shook his head in disgust, realizing they had more than enough evidence to send him away for life. He no longer cared about himself but was determined to give them nothing else. Glaring malevolently at Shepard, he said, “Jack Harper is the one who recognized what you were and saved your ass… rebuilt you, so you could do what needed to be done. You were just a fucking cog in the machine; it was his vision that truly saved us, not you and your blue whore’s last-minute heroics.”

“He did save me… I’ll grant you that.” Shepard sighed and continued, “But the man was a megalomaniac. His intention wasn’t to share power with anyone. He intended to control the Reapers and become a demi-god, a galactic dictator with the Reapers as his enforcers.”

“That’s a crock of shit.” An indignant McKay glared at Shepard. “If we hadn’t led the way, the Reapers would still be raping our worlds and we’d all be dead, just like all those cycles before us. We saved the whole Goddamned galaxy and all you alien-ass-kissers want is to piss away the leverage we gained through our sacrifices… our obvious superiority. Don’t even try to tell me I’m wrong. I’m done. Not telling you shit.”

“Whatever you say.” Culver shrugged. “Just trying to make life easier. If you had decided to cooperate, you might have joined Häberli and Douglas Walker in their tropical retirement.”

“And, as far as I’m concerned, it’s too late to change your mind, asshole,” Shepard growled with a
curl in her lip. “Since we now have all of your unencrypted communications, we don’t really need you anymore… so, your chance at a pleasant end to your life vanished before we even had the chance to offer it. Enjoy your nice, long life in prison, Mr McKay.”

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**Shadow Broker Vessel Chiroquol, At Large – 27 Oct 2188**

With his short little legs moving so quickly, it almost appeared like the rotund, diminutive Volus had veritably rolled into Oriana’s office, obviously excited to share his news. “I found it!”

“Found what, BeeVee?”

Oriana’s smile was always so sweet, Barla Von could never find it within himself to tell her how much he disliked the nickname she had attached to him, so he answered simply, words being spoken between the intermittent ‘sshhk’ sound of his rebreather, “The final money link to Mr Terra Firma, himself… Charles Saracino!”

Oriana’s eyes went wide for a moment before she unthinkingly asked, “Are you sure?” Before he could take a breath to reply, she quickly added, “No! Strike that… of course you’re sure, else you wouldn’t be standing here trying to catch your breath.” Shaking her head minutely, she took the OSD from his hand, inserted it into her own reader and glanced quickly through the contents displayed on the screen.

After several moments, she returned her attention to her enviro-suited crew member, saying, “You have outdone yourself this time, Barla Von… I truly believe this information will leave Mr Saracino twisting in the wind – for the rest of his natural life – probably in a cold, concrete compartment with vertical bars on the door and windows.”

“I really must ask, Ms Lawson. ‘… twisting in the wind’? How, exactly, would something like that be accomplished?”

“It’s a human idiom, BeeVee … from old Earth history… an allusion to being hanged by the neck and then left for dead in a suspended state… something that was done with depressing regularity in the American southwest of the 1700s and 1800s. In this context, it means Saracino has left himself wide-open to irrefutable criminal charges for soliciting – and paying for – the assassinations of four very prominent and important leaders.” Grinning at the Volus, she added, “Well done!”

Upon hearing this, Barla Von found he no longer cared what Oriana Lawson called him. Seeing the grin that lit her entire face when she looked at him made him a bit giddy. *I suppose it is okay for her to refer to me as ‘BeeVee’, as long as no one else is permitted to do the same.*

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**SSV Madrid, Exodus Cluster, At Large – 28 Oct 2188**

While on an extended patrol in one of the first extrasolar clusters reached by Humans, Captain Bruce Mitchell had been receiving regular updates on the situation in Vancouver – if one could call the paltry amount of data received since the last update in September – and even *that* source of information had abruptly gone silent within a week of the discovery of a Cerberus dagger planted in the middle of Frédéric Klein’s chest… It hadn’t resumed since, and the sudden cessation of information was worrisome; Mitchell had been the one advocating patience while his people looked for a way to bring Shepard and her blue whore down from their lofty pedestal… it was beginning to seem as if he had been *too* patient.
After attempting… and utterly failing… to have the blame for Klein’s murder dropped at the feet of the unknown woman who had attempted to wring Klein’s neck, Mitchell had been forced to fall back on trusting the agents on the ground with getting the job finished. The sudden silence was leading him to wonder if he’d been too direct in his last communication. Perhaps, actually voicing his disdain at their apparent utter incompetence had angered them, and they were responding by being petty… by withholding the information he sorely needed to press their movement forward.

Marine Sergeant Diane Häberli had fallen silent first, followed quickly by Master Sergeant Matthias Scholtz… then, lastly, Commander Seth McKay. Seth’s disappearance was the most disturbing; he had apparently failed to report to work and, when two Marines had been dispatched to find him, it appeared as though he had simply deserted his post. His omnitool and chrono had been turned off, a set of suitcases were missing, and there was absolutely no trace of the commander. His home showed no signs of forced entry and all of his personal possessions were undisturbed. *It’s as if he simply vanished into thin air! I’ll just bet the bastard lost his nerve and abandoned our cause!*

Mitchell’s face screwed into a frown as his mind raced. *Could Scholtz and Häberli have gone with him? If that’s the case, they’re together on this mutiny… Goddammit! I need to find them!*

“Only one way to find out,” he said aloud to himself, alone in his quarters, before he opened his comm unit. “Bridge. There’s nothing out here of any significance to us. Time to wrap this mission up and head for home.”

The response came back quickly. “Aye aye, Sir. Setting a course for Sol; estimated arrival, 0400 hours.”

“Excellent. Wake me at 0600 hours.” With a nod, Mitchell turned away and retreated to his quarters. *As if I’m going to get any sleep this night!*
Alliance Headquarters, Vancouver, Sol – 29 Oct 2188

“I understand that, Admiral… but I’m afraid the man will rabbit, and I really don’t want to spend the next six months of my life chasing his ass around the galaxy, fearing what he may do next.”

“Alright, Shepard.” Even as she agreed to the plan, Fleet Admiral Ines Lindholm shook her head. “I’ll do it because I understand your reasons, even if I don’t like bringing him here under false pretenses. But, if what you say is true, Captain Mitchell has much to answer for.”

“Unfortunately, everything he’s accused of is true.” Shepard sighed. “The collection of files I sent you contains every bit of evidence I possess for all the charges I have levied against him.”

In order to keep the Spectre’s presence unknown to Captain Mitchell, Lindholm returned to her desk, where Shepard would be out of sight as the admiral made the connection. Giving Shepard a cautionary nod to remain silent, Lindholm quickly opened a priority communications channel to the SSV Madrid.

“Admiral Lindholm.” Mitchell appeared nervous and annoyed by turns as he answered. “We returned from our patrol just this morning. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Lindholm frowned at the derisive tone in his voice as she replied in an even tone. “Something has come up, Captain. Your return is fortuitous… I’ve just received some rather time-sensitive data concerning the assassinations, and I have an important mission for your Scout Flotilla. As I cannot reveal any specifics over an unsecure link, you need to immediately come to my office for a personal briefing.”

Mitchell had wanted time to make initial inquiries regarding his missing information sources, but Lindholm was making it difficult. “Understood, Admiral… though you must realize I have not had sufficient time to prepare my patrol report. This afternoon would be better for me, and we could take care of both items of business at the same time…”
Lindholm raised a brow and there was cold steel in her voice as she responded, “I did say *timesensitive*, did I not? Since I didn’t receive any interim FLASH notifications from you, I assume your patrol report will simply be routine and its contents will have nothing worthy of note. As such, this new mission takes precedence. Is that understood?”

Mitchell realized he had crossed some undefined boundary and quickly came to attention. “Yes, Ma’am. I’ll get there as quickly as possible.”

He stared at the comm terminal for several moments after her image faded, his imagination running wild. Based on Lindholm’s insistence that he meet with her immediately, Mitchell weighed the possibilities and determined all his machinations were quite possibly about to come down around his ears. *Only thing I can do is warn Saracino.* He immediately placed a call to the Terra Firma Headquarters, only to be disappointed by the response. “I’m sorry, Sir, but Mr Saracino is currently out of the office… and there is no way for me to reach him. He’s in London, sequestered in a high-level meeting, which is expected to last the entire day. If you have a message for him, we could attempt to give it to him when, and if, they take a break.”

“You may want to interrupt the meeting for this one…” Mitchell closed his eyes and let out a long, slow breath. “Just tell him I’ve been called in by Admiral Lindholm… and the goddamned *Knight Shade* is here, in port. I have a funny feeling Charles may want to disappear for a while.”

“Disappear?” The aide, who had absolutely no idea what Mitchell was talking about, scowled. “Why on Earth should he care about you being called in by the Admiral?”

“How about his failing to object when your captain refused to search for all the survivors in the quiet space above Alchera… hours after the attack had ended and the enemy departed? Or, more recently, having

“Looking *within* the Alliance?” Mitchell’s eyes narrowed, and he looked at Lindholm for some clue… any indication… that this inquiry was headed down the path he feared. “I certainly hope you aren’t intent on asking me to use Scout Flotilla assets to spy on our own people, Admiral. You know as well as I that such actions are prohibited by law! I won’t do it!”

At that, Shepard scoffed, “*Now* you’re suddenly concerned about the rule of law? How about your failure to object when your captain refused to search for all the survivors in the quiet space above Alchera… hours after the attack had ended and the enemy departed? Or, more recently, having
Marines spy on those within the Headquarters as all of you put together your plans for your attempted coup?"

“What?” Mitchell did his best to look incredulous and sound indignant. “Are you out of your ever-loving mind? You really are…”

“Stow it, Mitchell!” Shepard roared. “You’re a damned traitor to the uniform! I’ve already researched and handed over everything I could dig up, including message texts and vid calls, regarding the multiple conversations you had with both Captain and Admiral Mikhailovich. I’ve also included your frequent communications with a certain Mr Charles Saracino, in which you made numerous favorable references to Jack Harper and the Cerberus Manifesto when he became the Illusive Man. You’ve been aiding them and working against the Alliance for years – over a decade, actually – but it took a damned assassination, right in our own Gods-be-damned headquarters, for it all to come to light. The Mikhailovitches have already been take care of… and now, you and Saracino are done!”

The now-livid Mitchell dropped all pretense and furiously snarled, “You still don’t see it, do you? With all your goddamned self-righteousness and grand schemes… you’re turning Humanity into slaves of the Asari! We won’t have it, Shepard!” The man was literally foaming at the mouth in his apoplectic rage. “We won’t allow you or your other disgusting alien lovers to continue to impede our destined rise to supremacy! All those despicable, insignificant races? They should be groveling at our feet, kissing our boots in supplication! And you! You could have helped us lead all of them! The Illusive Man saw the potential in you; he wanted you sitting as his right hand… an honor that any one of us would have forfeited everything to gain… but you threw it all away because of your lack of vision!”

He paused, a disgusted scowl on his face as he spat contemptuously on the deck. It served as the distraction he needed, with both Lindholm’s and the Spectre’s eyes following the gob as it flew to the floor. He reached out and grabbed Lindholm by the collar, yanking her roughly to his side as he drew his sidearm.

Given Mitchell’s anger… and desperation… it was likely Lindholm’s life was spared only because Shepard never hesitated. Without bothering to draw her own weapon, the Spectre twisted her wrist, activating her omni-blade as she flash-stepped to bury the burning weapon into the center of the man’s chest before his heavy pistol even cleared its holster.

The look of shock and surprise on Mitchell’s face was tragically humorous as the hand with which he had grabbed the admiral fell away to clutch at his own gaping wound. Shepard twisted her forearm and pulled her hand free as the disposable silicon-carbide weapon broke away at the omni-tool’s generation point. The heat produced by the flash-forged blade had immediately seared the massive laceration closed; not a single drop of blood fell to the floor, but the blade, slammed into Mitchell’s chest with the massive force behind Shepard’s genetically enhanced musculature, had split his ribcage and nearly severed his heart in two as it passed through to pierce his left lung.

To Lindholm’s credit, she never hesitated; her military training kicked in and she lashed out with a well-placed kick the moment she had separation. Mitchell’s knee buckled, and he was unable to recover his balance… his muscles no longer able to function in his shock at the speed of the dual attack. He crumpled to the floor, mouth gaped open like a fish out of water; there was no air moving past his lips… no sound created by his vocal cords at his futile attempt to voice his only regret – that he had failed to take either one of his aggressors with him, particularly that damned infuriating and utterly irredeemable Spectre.
The two Marines who had escorted Mitchell to the admiral’s office came blasting in through the doorway as soon as the sound of clash within her office reached them; they both slid to a halt and watched in awe as the scene before them unfolded, quickly realizing that neither the Spectre nor their Fleet Admiral required any form of assistance from them, other than to remove the resulting corpse from the office. As a resounding silence grew at the conclusion of the struggle, the lead guard quietly cleared his throat. “Where would you like us to take the body, Admiral?”

Having not seen or heard them come in, Lindholm’s head snapped around at the unexpected voice. Hot blood still rushing through her veins, she took a deep, calming breath to stem the rushing flow of its accompanying adrenaline before she finally responded, “To the facility morgue, Master Chief… Where else?”

“Just checkin’, Ma’am.” The man actually grinned and added with a chuckle, “I’d be happy to dispose of that piece of trash however you told me to do it… to include shipping him to Tuchanka for the Krogan to feed to their pet varren.”

The admiral was unsuccessful in her attempts to contain a faint smile as she answered quietly, “I don’t think that will be necessary, Quinn… but thank you for the suggestion.”

“I’m with you, Master Chief Tyberg.” Shepard still carried the burden of knowing Saracino was still out there… free… so wasn’t prepared to be so lenient, even to the deceased. “His carcass shouldn’t even be permitted to pollute our morgue… but, I suppose, we shouldn’t allow ourselves to stoop to their level, either.” She looked back to Lindholm and continued, “Thank you for the reminder, Ma’am.”

“My pleasure, Spectre. It’s necessary to remember who we are and what we stand for, else we end up fighting for all the wrong reasons.” She paused for only the briefest of moments before adding, “Please, keep that in the forefront of your mind as you journey to London to confront Charles Saracino. Please, do not allow him to provoke you into actions you will later regret. Saracino simply cannot lead you down a path that will taint your reputation; the galaxy still needs you, Spectre Shepard.”

The admiral offered a hand, which the Spectre grasped and pumped twice; she met Lindholm’s eyes and gave her a silent nod of agreement to indicate her acceptance of the warning, keeping her own council as she released the woman’s hand, turned, and left the office without a word. *I may have already crossed that line, Admiral… but I will do my damnedest to ensure I never cross it again.*

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**Alliance Headquarters, London, Earth – 29 Oct 2188**

The Asari manufactured heavy corvette *Knight Shade* descended rapidly from its sub-orbital transpolar flight as co-pilot Daxa Rusim requested priority docking clearance at the Alliance controlled transient berths near the main headquarters buildings in London. Approach vector entered and docking cradle selected, pilot Lusmeni Thoni flew the approach down to within a half-kilometer of their assigned berth, at which point she slaved the navi-computer to fly the final distance and settle the ship into its berth. Within a few minutes, the *Knight Shade* had gently settled into the cradle specially designed for her hull configuration. As a dedicated Alliance ground crew, hand-picked by Shepard and Tali’Zorah, worked to connect the ship to ground-based power, the whining complaint of several APUs gradually faded as they were shut down, bringing relative silence to the docks once more.

Spectre Samantha Shepard, monitoring the ship’s approach as the destroyed city scrolled past on the monitor, sighed heavily when she caught sight of the massive crater left behind by the Reapers in
their final, all-out attempt to eliminate the Human race… to obliterate the planet’s civilization from existence. Significant progress had been made in removing and recycling the scattered metal and rubble left behind, from destroyed machines, both Reaper and Alliance… and from buildings blasted apart by Reaper weapons, especially since the SILC had joined the efforts. Still, it was quite evident to the Spectre that a massive amount of cleanup and reconstruction was left to be done.

Shepard rose from her seat and began completing her preparations for what she hoped would be a peaceful arrest of Charles Saracino, the primary architect of the plot to simultaneously assassinate four high-ranking officials… Humans, all… that had been working to insure the continued integration of the Earth Alliance with the other galactic races. *Was I that damned naïve to believe the ideals espoused by Jack Harper would quickly wither and die after Maya Brooks put a bullet through his indoctrinated skull? Gods be damned! How can these people be so blindly self-centered?*

> [You cannot control the thinking… or even change the opinions… of such people, Siame.] Sam felt the bit of sadness that accompanied her bondmate’s thoughts through the link. *From what little I have learned of Human history, such people have always existed… their sole focus in life being the subjugation of others they perceive as weaker, less intelligent… different. The achievement of interstellar spaceflight has simply spread that xenophobia to the entire galaxy.]*

A grim smile appeared on Shepard’s face as she answered, *I had not intended to share those thoughts with you, Ionán álaimn… and you are correct, of course. I only wish their twisted visions for Humanity had not resulted in so much unnecessary pain and death.*

She momentarily stiffened in response as a pair of arms wrapped lovingly around her from behind. “Their plans didn’t succeed… at least, not completely,” came the comforting words whispered in her ear. “We’ve succeeded in discovering the source of this particular strain of xenophobia. Once Saracino is in custody, Terra Firma’s organization can be systematically dismantled.”

Shepard carefully turned within the embrace to face her bondmate; wrapping her own arms around Liara, she replied, “I pray you’re correct, Blue. I am more than ready for all of this to be done so we can go home.”

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**Cerulean Aurora Hotel, London, Earth – 29 Oct 2188**

Charles Saracino had stopped in the lobby and ordered a light meal, requesting it be sent to his luxury suite. The meeting… meetings, actually… had dragged on into the early evening hours; he was quite tired, but still needed to wade through the myriad messages that had been downloaded to his secure terminal during the day. He began eating the salad that had been delivered to his door while reading and replying to the first of the six ‘urgent’ messages sitting in his mailbox.

He was nearly done eating his late dinner when he finally opened the fifth of the six messages bearing an ‘urgent’ tag; he set his fork down on the plate as he scrolled through the message. Leaning back in his chair, he felt as if he was going to be sick; his aide in Vancouver had not understood the warning Captain Mitchell had been attempting to convey. Saracino, however, understood completely. Appetite completely gone, he shoved the tray away as he rose from his chair. *No time to get cleaned up… if Mitchell is warning me to disappear, I have to get the Hell out this place… right now!*

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Charles Saracino had left the elevator on the second floor, there to take the nearby stairs down to the
ground floor and lobby; the door opened into an alcove that was mostly hidden from direct view of anyone in the hallway. He carefully looked about through a doorway opening of mere centimeters before exiting into the alcove. After carefully inspecting the portion of the lobby he could see, he began walking briskly for the main doors.

The sudden realization his good fortune had deserted him came as a pair of hands with the seeming strength of a machinist’s vice clamped painfully onto his upper arm and the back of his neck, quickly followed by a second pair of hands grasping his other arm, one on his triceps, the other on his forearm. A soft, feminine voice, completely at odds with the strength being exhibited by the hands painfully crushing his triceps and neck, spoke menacingly into his right ear from only centimeters away. “Come along quietly if you wish to survive this encounter.”

Saracino made the nearly fatal mistake of attempting to jerk free of the hand grasping his right arm; the unseen person holding his left arm released his forearm long enough to deliver a targeted jab to his side above the hipbone. This payment for his unsuccessful effort at freedom brought tears to his eyes as his legs momentarily buckled – he remained on his feet only because his captors had not released their crushing grip on either of his arms or his neck.

Grimacing from the pain in his left side, he spat out, “I can guarantee your miserable life just got significantly shorter. If you…” The rest of his words were lost in a muffled grunt of pain as a gauntlet-clad hand fell in place across his mouth and nose in order to silence him. He continued to squirm in an ineffective effort to free himself as he was guided outside and towards an odd-looking shuttlecraft sitting close by. As his captors brought him closer to the unusual craft, Saracino immediately realized by whom he had been abducted. With one hand clamped painfully on the back of his neck and another on his mouth, he was unable to turn his head, but seeing the emblem affixed to the dull, grey-blue hull beside the deployed entrance ramp brought crystal-clear understanding to his mind. An Asari Spectre craft! Son of a flying blue whore! This has to be the work of that fucking red-headed bitch, Shepard!

They shoved him roughly up against the side of the shuttle, where one of them held him in place as the other patted him down for hidden weapons before yanking his arms behind his back and clamping a pair of painfully tight restraints on his wrists. “Just who in Hell do you think you are? I’m…”

He was cut off mid-sentence as Spectre Shepard revealed herself by spinning him around to look at him and angrily reply, “Spectre Samantha Shepard at your service.” With a grim smile, she continued, “And I know exactly who you are. We’ve met once before… 2183, on the Citadel; you asked me to support your attempt to win a seat on the Alliance Parliament. I didn’t like you then, and my opinion of you hasn’t changed during the intervening years. I’m taking you into custody for conspiracy… namely, solicitation of and payment for assassinations of four high-ranking Systems Alliance officials, sedition, being an accessory to attempted murder, and accessory to murder in the first. I have all the proof required to execute you here on the spot but, against my better judgement, I’m going to transport you to the CGC so one of your intended victims can take part in passing judgement on you… after I give the Council all the proof I have of your complicity in all this.”

“There’s not a jury in the galaxy that’d have the balls to convict me of anything, you fucking bitch. You picked the wrong man to screw with.” The chuckle he received in response chilled him to the bone.

Arms crossed under her chest, Shepard calmly stated, “I’m a Council Spectre, Mr Saracino. You won’t be getting a jury trial by your Earth peers, and I seriously doubt you have any ability whatsoever to sway the opinions of the Galactic Council… with credits or any other influence you mistakenly believe you wield. I can only hope they give you a sentence truly befitting the severity of
Taking a step back, Shepard motioned to Livos Tanni. “Escort our guest onboard, Captain. Make sure he’s strapped in securely… I wouldn’t want him to suffer any injuries during our maneuvering and short flight back to the *Knight Shade.*”

The leader of Team 1 grinned as she replied, “As you wish, Nara.”

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**Council Chambers, CGC, Widow System – 30 Oct 2188**

With the preponderance of evidence provided by Spectre Shepard, the guilt of Charles Saracino was never in question and he was convicted without hesitation. The primary discussion now revolved around what exactly should be done to the man in the way of punishment… and just who should carry out whatever sentence was decided upon.

“We made a huge mistake with Sparatus!” Councilor Quentius spat. “We should have just turned him over to the Spectre Corps and been done with him; it would have saved us all a tremendous amount of grief and saved a lot of innocent lives in the long run. I say death.”

“Agreed!” Urdnot Jara’s cold, reptilian eyes shifted to Shepard. “And I can think of none better than Shepard to carry out the sentence. After all, she is the one who brought this Pyjak before us for judgement. It is her right!”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Councilors.” Shepard shook her head slightly as she continued, “But I’ve been personally responsible for enough killing. If Saracino is to be executed, I would prefer it not be done by my hand.”

“Hmmm.” Valern stared at the Spectre with unblinking eyes. “If not by your hand, then by whose, Shepard? It would seem, however unusual this may be, that I am actually in agreement with the Krogan…” His gaze shifted to Jara. “I suppose just about anything can happen… once in a while.” Shifting his attention back to the Spectre, he finished, “You are, after all, the one who brought him to us… so would it not be your duty to finish this?”

He left the question hanging, and Tevos spoke up to fill the void. “We have already established the sentence, so, that is not in question.” Her gaze held pity as she looked upon her friend. “But I can easily understand the Spectre’s reluctance over this issue; as she implies, there are many deaths already on her conscience; even when those blows were dealt with more than sufficient cause, it does not always expunge the feeling of guilt for the loss of life.” She paused and forced a pained smile onto her face. “If we do leave it in your hands, Shepard… Do you have any proposed methods by which to handle this?”

Samantha’s eyes came up to meet the sorrowful green orbs of the councilor and she sighed, remaining silent for a long moment as she thought about her response. Finally, she dropped her head, only briefly, before looking back up and sweeping the table with her eyes, meeting those of every councilor present. “I suppose I do. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time… and perhaps this is the way to solve two issues with a single solution.”

When Shepard paused, Valern, with his normal Salarian impatience, spoke first. “Well. What is it, then? What do you propose?”

Shepard stared at him for a brief moment, then smiled and chuckled, shaking her head as she began, “The Spectre Corps, by design, is an intelligence organization that… of necessity… must frequently
work outside the law… but the war reduced our numbers significantly. Another organization suffered the same fate and reformed with new purpose.” Her eyes shifted back to Tevos. “I’m speaking of the Justicars.”

“What are you talking about?” Tevos, caught very much by surprise, blurted out, “Explain yourself, please!”

Shepard willingly obliged. “I’ve stayed in frequent contact with Samara. Their organization is dying, so the Justicars are being forced to rethink their five thousand-plus sutras. They have actually agreed they are antiquated… no longer in accord with contemporary Asari society, which makes it nearly impossible to recruit new members. They are in the process of revising their sutras to be much more basic… simply requiring they use a discipline of logic to interpret existing Asari law, and then act accordingly.”

“A process which could be easily expanded to Galactic Law.” Given his normal silence unless spoken to directly, Prime Huulik’s comments were unexpected. “The SILC…” He paused and directed his trio of glowing red optical sensors at Valern as he continued, “… and the Salarians… have excellent logical reasoning capabilities and could be included in the task of interpretation and enforcement.”

“Wait. That’s something entirely different.” Osoba looked at the Prime in surprise and then directed his question to Shepard. “Are you talking about simply asking the Justicars to join the Spectres, or actually forming an inter-species task force of some kind?”

“The latter, Councilor.” Shepard shrugged her shoulders. “On Earth, we have multiple agencies of law enforcement; including those that operate in the open, in full view and scrutiny of the public… and those that do not, operating out of sight, in the shadows. The Spectres most definitely fall into the second category of those that do not, and I strongly believe the Council needs a counterpart to the Spectre Corps – a police force which enforces Galactic Law and operates in full view of the public.”

Din Korlack, who was normally extremely disrespectful toward anyone Human, was surprisingly in agreement. “That is actually an excellent idea, Shepard; assuming, of course, you’re honestly proposing an inter-species force and not an organization run by the Earth clan, with token ‘alien’ clan members…”

Tevos glared at the Volus. “That is quite unnecessary, Councilor! After everything Shepard has done for us? Really?”

“Apologies, Shepard,” the chastised Korlack responded before falling silent.

The comments came as no surprise to the Spectre and, because of his rebreather, she couldn’t tell if Korlack was honestly being sincere or not, so simply ignored the entire exchange. “I don’t see it as a difficult organization to establish… if each member race is given a set number of positions to fill? Very similar to the system used for the Council Fleet?”

Valern quickly added, “With the lead position rotated between the primary Council members?”

“Rotated between the races of all the Council members, you mean,” growled Jara. “Right?”

“Well, yes. Of course,” answered Valern, glancing at the large Krogan female seated beside him as he quickly amended his statement. “Leadership of the organization should be rotated among all of the Council members. Agreed.”

Shepard coughed and covered her mouth to hide the smirk on her face. Once she had caged her
expression, she continued, “The Asari have their Republican Guard, Earth has the International Peacekeepers, the Turians, their Unification Force. I’m sure each of us has an equivalent of some kind… except the SILC, who include the entire Collective in their decision making…”

“So, exactly as we do with the military, we pull personnel from the individual law enforcement agencies to fill our galactic police ranks.” Tevos paused and ran a hand over her crests as she considered the implications. “This will take a significant amount of time to structure properly, to be fair to all the member races of the Council.”

Shepard chuckled and asked, “So is that a yes?”

“Well, it is from me.” Tevos blushed when she realized the assumption she had just made and glanced around the table as she queried, “Any opposed?” She nodded quickly when none of the group spoke out. “So be it.” Her focus shifted back to the Spectre. “I leave the invitation to the Justicars in your hands, Shepard… but that is the start of the long-term solution and does not solve the immediate dilemma of who shall be Charles Saracino’s executioner.”

Drawing the attention of everyone seated at the table, Osoba sighed and stood up, looking first to Shepard; once she met his eyes, he gave her only the slightest of nods before directing a solemn gaze at the Asari councilor. “Place him into my custody, Raesia. He is a Human problem and should be dealt with by our justice system. As the Systems Alliance representative, I will carry the Galactic Council death penalty notice with me, home to Earth, and I swear to you, and the Council at large, that it will be administered without hesitation… this very day.”

“Thank you, Councilor Osoba. Your acceptance of this disagreeable task is duly noted.”

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T'Soni Country Estate, Thessia, Athena Nebula – 30 Oct 2188

It was early evening when the Knight Shade returned to Thessia. It was a reserved group that disembarked from the ship to be greeted by a welcoming staff. Lyessa met them at the door to give Shepard a warm hug and whisper softly in the woman’s ear. “You only did what was necessary, Captain; war and its aftereffects are seldom pleasant. We will simply pray to the Goddess that the Reaper War is finally and truly in the past.”

The House Steward pushed back and smiled. “Now. Dinner will be ready momentarily, so get your gear stowed and get cleaned up. I expect you all at the table within twenty minutes, while the food is still hot.”

Smiling softly, Shepard took Liara’s hand. “Only twenty minutes? We best get to it, then.”

The silence that fell over the group as they walked toward the weapons storage room was stifling, until Jatok couldn’t stand it anymore. Being his typical, irreverent self, he suddenly blurted out, “Fuck Chuck! That pile of Pyjak shit deserved every bit of trouble we heaped upon his head, along with all his cronies. I don’t regret a damned instant of it, and none of you should either!” He growled, “He’s responsible for the deaths of good people… heroes, all of ‘em. Only thing I regret is the method of his death; I still think you should have let me take him back to Tuchanka as a little snack for Kalros! That would have been closer to real justice.”

For the first time in many hours, Shepard honestly smiled; a rather reserved smile, but a smile, nonetheless. Liara grinned in return and squeezed her siame’s hand as memories of their frantic run across Tuchanka moved to the forefront of their minds. Liara responded quietly, “That would have been a sight to see, for sure… but we escaped Kalros the one and only time we met her. Perhaps he
would have found the motivation to do the same, and then where would we be?”

“Right back to where we were before Dominic stepped up.” Shepard sighed heavily. “It would have fallen back into my lap…”

“Not a chance, Shepard,” Jatok growled. “If Kalros didn’t get him, I’d kill him myself. You wouldn’t need to worry about that lowlife… not on my home soil… and I’d have no regrets.” His beady reptilian eyes offered no compromise as he insisted, “And you shouldn’t either!”

Given everything that had transpired, dinner was a surprisingly enjoyable, casual affair. It lasted much longer than was routine, the entire house feeling the need for community; to everyone, it seemed to have been an extraordinarily long time since they had all been truly able to simply relax. The sensation felt odd, but in a good way; no one wanted to let it go, so they all stayed and socialized for a couple of hours following the meal.

When Shepard yawned, Lyessa nodded at Liara and stood from her chair. “Alright everyone, off you go… else I’ll be here all night cleaning up this mess!” Several of the commandos laughed and immediately chipped in to help Lyessa while Liara smiled at her siame. “It seems it is time for us to retreat to our room and take advantage of some quiet time.”

“Happy to take you up on that, Blue.”

They quietly made their way upstairs, slipped into sweats, started a fire and plopped themselves down on their small settee in front of the fireplace. Shepard leaned her head back and closed her eyes. “Don’t know why I’m so tired tonight.”

“Oh, let me guess.” The sarcasm in Liara’s voice was poignant as she continued, “It couldn’t possibly have anything to do with the fact that we’ve been on the go, constantly, for the past month, ever since the Headquarters dedication, could it?” Shepard’s eyes slipped open and Liara leaned over to gently caress the woman’s lips with her own before asking, “How many good nights of sleep have we had since then? Maybe two?”

As Shepard started to answer, Liara placed a finger across her lips. “Shush, love. I had no intention for you to actually respond to that question. It’s unnecessary, as we are both quite knowledgeable regarding the answer.”

“I was simply going to say it’s hard to believe it’s only been a month.” Shepard hummed in contentment as Liara’s hand dropped down to massage the woman’s chest. “It seems much longer than that.”

“True enough…” Liara snuck in another little peck before continuing, “But now, at least, it is done and over with. Earth’s civil authorities will be investigating Terra Firma and removing all the malcontents, LEAP is being kept in check by our new allies, Atlas, and the Brokerage hasn’t turned up any new grand schemes involving anything. On that front, it all seems to be business as usual, for a change.”

Shepard smiled softly, her eyes glistening brightly in the light of the fire. “Have I told you lately that I love you, Liara T’Soni?”

Chuckling softly, Liara replied, “Not nearly enough, Samantha Shepard.”

Shepard sat up and wrapped a hand gingerly around Liara’s neck, letting her fingers stroke tenderly across the folds they found there. Liara drew a quick breath as the Spectre whispered, “Then I most
“I love you, too, Samantha… always and forever.” Liara’s blue eyes, which, as of late, had held only ice and steely resolve, were soft with affection as her mind reached out. *And tomorrow is a new day, finally free from the doubts and uncertainties of the past thirty days.*

*Yes, it is. It is also Samhain… a fitting festival to say goodbye to those we lost.*

“That is very true…” Liara pulled back to meet Shepard’s eyes. “I had nearly forgotten the date; it is the perfect time for us to let go of the past and begin anew.” Liara smiled softly and raised a hand to tuck a few errant auburn strands up behind Shepard’s ear. “Come, Sam.” Liara rose elegantly from the sofa and reached out, offering her hand. “Let me take you to bed… and we will simply let tomorrow be the beginning of the next chapter in our lives.”

Chapter End Notes

And thus ends this installment of Promises Delivered – New Beginnings. Next up is ‘The Spectre Years,’ following a very short break to get the next story line plotted out. Thanks to all of our loyal readers for sticking with us through all of Shepard and Liara’s trials and tribulations, all based on the promise of an eventually happy future filled with little blue babies.

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