| Rating: | Mature |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | F/F |
| Fandom: | Mass Effect |
| Relationship: | Female Shepard/Liara T'Soni |
| Character: | Karin Chakwas, Miranda Lawson, Normandy (Mass Effect), Original Asari Character(s) |
| Series: | Part 3 of Chronicles of Samantha Shepard |

### Working With the Enemy

by Desert Sunrise (sniderde92)

Summary

After disappearing for two years and waking up amidst an age-old enemy, Shepard fights to regain what she has lost -- the trust of the Alliance, some of her dearest friends and her lost love. With a new Normandy, a Cerberus crew and self doubts raised by the improbability of her own continued existence, Shepard must battle humanity's newest emerging enemy, the Collectors.
Chapter Notes

This story is the third in the Samantha Shepard series, following (1) First Life and (2) Only Hope Remains. This installment is basically ME2, with some AU twists with "extras." Some new characters were introduced, so you may want to start with First Life if you want to figure out who they are... or who my Shepard is, other than paragon space-born hero Vanguard. It has a few plot twists and changes of sequencing, but I don't believe there will be anything you can't figure out by context... hope you enjoy!

References:
Casca Rufio Longinus, The Eternal Mercenary, series by Barry Sadler

Commander Samantha Shepard sat in the Cerberus shuttle staring out the window, but seeing nothing. She was still trying to wrap her head around what the hell was happening with her life. At least she hoped it was her life, and not some clone or highly advanced artificial intelligence (AI) that only thought it was Commander Shepard. God, how did I get here...? The last thing she remembered from her 'real life' was being spaced as the Normandy disintegrated around her; her life as she knew it should have been over, yet here she was, supposedly in the flesh, with only a vague back-story to fill in the gaps. Project Lazarus. I have risen from the dead. Maybe this was the worst part of Hell; to make someone think they actually had a second chance at life, just to rip it all away again. She was sitting in the shuttle, but even for her it was hard to believe. As long as it's Lazarus and not Casca Rufio Longinus! I don't want to wander forever as a soldier, never knowing peace!

She remembered a brief glance of Lawson and Wilson when she woke once before, apparently an attempt on Wilson's part to get rid of her, saved only by Miranda walking in for an unscheduled check before she went to bed. Bad luck for Wilson, because that was when Lawson started to suspect something was up. Bad luck because Lawson was very good at what she did; she started checking into his actions and discovered Wilson was working with the Shadow Broker. People who crossed Cerberus tended to end up dead. Just like Dad. Yet, here Shepard was, sitting in a Cerberus shuttle, actually contemplating working with them. No; she planned to use their resources to get back to the Alliance and then find Liara at the first opportunity. Now that's a plan.

Freedom's Progress had been an eye opener; Collectors! Shepard briefly wondered if the ship that attacked the Normandy was a Collector ship. It would fit the limited data she received before it blew the Normandy into nothingness... or better, the data they didn't receive because the vessel had matched no known signatures. They hadn't known what the hell it was, just that it packed one hell of a punch; a punch strong enough to rip the Normandy in half and kill her. Or so she thought at the time. She couldn't really have died and been resurrected... could she? One good thing about whatever it was that happened to her was she no longer suffered from any of the Prothean beacon nightmares. Somehow, they were no longer prevalent; maybe her subconscious just blocked them because they were no longer relevant. The dreams had gotten them to Ilos and given them a heads up on the Reapers; the beacon had served its purpose and they had stopped the immediate threat of Sovereign. Of course it didn't really matter, because her nightmares had just been replaced; now she dreamed about dying. Constantly reliving the last breaths you ever thought you would take was definitely bad. Another bad thing was her new body; it was strong and fast, no mistaking that, with its enhanced skeleton and cybernetic improvements, but it wasn't hers. Same size, same shape, same
face; she weighed more because of her alloy-enhanced skeleton, but all her old scars, the visible memories of her past, where she came from, how she became who she was... they were all gone. Most people would be thrilled, but for Shepard, it was like her history had been erased. In the most basic sense, it looked like her, but one doesn't go through death and a rebirth without coming out changed. So, she sat on a Cerberus shuttle and whether she wanted it or not, whether she was ready or not, the purpose of her new lease on life was to stop the Collectors, no matter who she worked with.

She arrived back at the Cerberus base station and went directly to the communications room to speak with the Illusive Man, whom Shepard referred to as TIM. She thought 'The Illusive Man' was too damn pretentious. When the image solidified, the voice spoke, "Shepard. Good work on Freedom's Progress." TIM was surprised that the Quarians actually forwarded the data from Veetor's debrief, given their history with Cerberus. Shepard was derisive, and told him he should try playing nice one in a while, that he might be surprised by the results. TIM countered that some of their more radical operations made their reputation one that didn't allow them to play nice and get results. More important to him was Shepard's confirmation that the Collectors were definitely involved in the disappearances. He then stressed again that the Council and the Alliance were ignoring the issue by insisting the Reaper threat ended with Sovereign, and they had spent the last two years sweeping it under the rug and discrediting any stories about a continued threat. TIM then stated, "I won't wait until the Reapers are on the march. We need to take the fight to them."

Shepard agreed with the strategy and looked straight at the Illusive Man. "If this is a war, and I'm going to lead it, I need a really good team. I need my team."

"I've already compiled a list of soldiers, scientist, and mercenaries. You'll get dossiers on the best of them as we determine their locations. Catching up to them and convincing them to work with you could be challenging, but you're a natural leader. I have confidence you'll do just fine. While you put your team together, I'll continue to track the Collectors. When they make their next appearance, I'll put you and your team on an intercept course."

Shepard told TIM to keep his list. "I already told you, I need my team. I want people I trust, the ones who helped me stop Saren and the Geth."

TIM wasn't swayed. "That was two years ago, Commander. Most of them have moved on or fell off the grid, like Ashley Williams and Garrus Vakarian. Williams is on some special project, location unknown. Dr T'Soni is on Illium, working for the Shadow Broker and can't be trusted. Garrus Vakarian worked for her for a while when she started as an information broker, but when she changed allegiances, Vakarian refused to work with her anymore and disappeared. I don't know where he is now, and our sources have been unable to locate him."

Shepard was dumbstruck by the idea of Liara working for the Shadow Broker, but tried to not let her surprise show. Sam didn't believe it, and if that piece of information proved false, which Shepard believed was the case, then little else the Illusive Man was saying could be trusted. *If only I had known that before I saw Tali! She could have checked it out for me!* Without an independent source of intel, Shepard was at a severe disadvantage. She realized it was nothing she hadn't overcome before and pressed on. "What about Wrex?"

TIM stated flatly, "You know he returned to Tuchanka, and I know he hasn't gone off world since. He's working to unite the Krogan clans and convince them to find a cure to the Genophage. You're welcome to try, but he completely ignored all our attempts at contact." Shepard crossed her arms and thought, *yeah...because he has sooooo many reasons to trust you!*

"And Tali? She already helped us on Freedom's Progress. She said she had another mission. If we
can find out what that is and I help her finish it, maybe she'll join us.” Samantha didn't hold much hope for that; Tali had been pretty firm in turning Shepard down when she asked the first time, but it still might be nice to know what she's working on.

TIM was evasive, but didn't shoot down the possibility completely, answering, "That was unexpected. I need more intel before I can commit to that."

Shepard just shook her head in disgust, not that she expected true cooperation from Cerberus anyway. "Okay, I get it. They're not available. Send me the dossiers and I'll start looking them over."

TIM took a long drag on his cigarette then said, "Good. Two things before you go. First, head to Omega and find Mordin Solus. He's a brilliant Salarian scientist. He's our best shot at finding a way to counteract the Collector seeker swarms."

Shepard nodded in agreement. "Sounds logical. That will be essential to future operations. Can't do much if we're stuck in some sort of stasis. What's the second thing?"

TIM looked smug for a moment, and then announced, "I found a pilot I think you might like. I hear he's one of the best. Someone you can trust." With that, the Illusive Man abruptly cut the transmission.

Before Shepard could even turn around she heard the unmistakable voice of Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau. "Hey, Commander. Just like old times, huh?"

Shepard was mostly quiet, but Joker spoke for a long time, telling her the tale of woe of how everything fell apart when she disappeared. The Council disavowed anything and everything about the Reapers, claiming Sovereign was just an advanced Geth ship. They got no support from the Alliance, and the team was broken up and everyone's records were sealed. Then he said that he got grounded. All Joker had ever wanted to do was fly and he was the best the Alliance had to offer, yet they grounded him. When Cerberus told him about Shepard and offered him a chance to fly again, all he could say was 'hell, yes!' Samantha asked him if he trusted the Illusive Man and Joker let out a sad laugh, "Well, I don't trust anybody who makes more money than me, but they're not all bad. Saved your life... and let me fly."

Shepard looked at the pilot, "And you don't question my being here at all?"

Joker laughed, "Sure, I question it, but I questioned you being dead too. A few of us...me, Garrus, and of course Liara. As far as we were concerned, no body, no proof. The Alliance just quit looking, and we all hated them for it."

The entire time he was filling her in on what happened while she was gone, he was slowly leading the way to a viewing platform. Once they got there, he stopped and hit a button. As the lights came up on the other side of the windows, Jeff said reverently, "And there's this. They only told me last night." Shepard stood in the hallway with her hands on her hips, looking into a large hangar. As the lights came up, they slowly revealed a beautiful sleek frigate. She was shaped like the Normandy SR-1, but much larger, almost twice the size, and painted in Cerberus black and yellow, but Samantha thought she looked beautiful. Shepard looked at Joker and he smiled, saying "It's good to be home, huh, Commander?"

Shepard let out a low whistle and said, "I guess we'll have to give her a name." Two days later, the Normandy SR-2 left the hangar on her maiden voyage headed for Omega. Samantha couldn't believe it; the Normandy was a beautiful ship, very similar to the SR-1, but its increased size allowed several upgrades. Miranda Lawson gave her the full tour. When they first came in through the airlock, they entered the Normandy on what was considered Deck 2. The SR-1 only had three decks, but the SR-
2 had five. A huge cockpit was on her left; it was much more spacious than on the SR-1 and included a weapons station and co-pilot's chair. To the right was an elevated walkway with multiple recessed workstations running down each side of the ship. It was the work center of the SR-2. At the far end, Shepard could see the Combat Information Center, very similar to the CIC on the original Normandy, with a huge holographic representation of the ship and an interactive galactic navigation map. It all looked very familiar, just bigger with a lot more working room. The room itself was kind of shaped like an egg with the map area sitting in the wider end of the irregular oval, with additional navigation and operations stations continuing along the outside bulkheads. Other sections on Deck 2 included the armory and a research lab, as well as a briefing and communications room.

As Samantha stood at the end of the walkway surveying the room, Jacob Taylor walked up and welcomed her aboard the new Normandy, and introduced her to a unique feature of the new ship. The Enhanced Defense Intelligence, or Edi, was the ship's artificial intelligence; Shepard crossed her arms and stared at the projection in front of her. "Helmsmen aren't happy when someone takes control of the ship way from them. Especially Joker." In a rather sexy female voice, Edi informed the commander that she was restricted to electronic and cyber warfare suites and that she could observe and offer analysis and advice, nothing more. At no time was she able to interface with the ship's other systems. Shepard figured that might appease Joker, but she doubted it. There was also a new position in the CIC, filled by Yeoman Kelly Chambers. She was a personal assistant to the commander, completing various tasks from screening incoming messages to providing crew readiness evaluations. Shepard figured anybody who got some of the crap paperwork off her desk had to be worthwhile.

Lawson continued the tour, going all the way down to the bottom of the ship, Deck 5. There wasn't much to see; it was the hangar deck and the SR-2 was equipped with a standard Kodiak shuttle and a prototype hovercraft, the M-44 Hammerhead tank. Deck 4 included Engineering, and port and starboard cargo areas. The engineers were introduced as Kenneth Donnelly and Gabriella Daniels. Operative Lawson realized the introductions were all quick, but promised Shepard she'd have plenty of time to get to know the crew during transit toward Omega. Deck 3 included crew quarters, mess-hall, life support, medical bay, the AI core and The XO's office, as well as port and starboard observation lounges. The crew quarters were actually that; instead of rows of sleeping pods like the original Normandy, the crew had actual rooms and everything was civilian grade instead of military grade accommodations. Unlike the economy kitchen on the SR-1, there was a full kitchen, run by Mess Sergeant Gardner.

When Samantha walked into the Medical Bay, she couldn't believe her eyes. "Karin!" With three quick full strides, Shepard was across the room and grabbed a very surprised Karin Chakwas up into a hug. Samantha released the surprised doctor from the hug but still held her by the shoulders, saying "It is so good to see a familiar face...especially yours, Karin."

Karin smiled, and spoke very reservedly, working hard to contain her emotions, "Commander Shepard. I watched the Normandy crumble with you on board. You mother and I attended your memorial service. I never thought I'd see this day!"

Shepard beamed, unable to believe Karin was on board. "Karin, I need to finish my inaugural tour, but I will be back and we'll talk. I promise you that!"

Karin gave her quick hug and told her, "I'll hold you to that, Commander!"

Shepard turned to Lawson to finish the tour. "All that's left is your quarters on Deck 1, Commander. Shall we?" Shepard was awestruck when she walked into the captain's quarters. The room was positively huge, with the left hand wall by the entryway being dominated by a huge fish tank. The tank's backlighting was a wonderful shade of blue that made her heart ache, thinking of a certain
Asari she had yet to locate on Illium, Shadow Broker be damned. On the right was a spacious office with the obligatory computer terminals and a large see-through glass display, with a model of the Normandy inside. Cerberus must have known about her penchant for model collecting, though it just made her sad to know that her entire collection had been destroyed with the Normandy SR-1. There were also a number of empty bookshelves, also devoid of all her personal books; the office was just a sad reminder of days gone by. Besides the office, there was a full up bathroom with a sizeable shower, much more than the little cubbyhole on the old Normandy, so this one was definitely an upgrade.

As she walked further into the room, there was a short set of only three steps leading down to the main living space. A very nice leather sectional couch with a couple of lounge chairs and a central table dominated the space, with a small personal desk and a very empty queen bed. There was a small closet, with a personal armor locker, which was a nice touch. No need to change with the rest of the crew down in the general armory. At least she'd have some modicum of privacy from most of the Cerberus crew. She pulled up her omnitool to run a scanning program and stopped short. This isn't my old omnitool. All my special programs are gone. She turned to Operative Lawson and asked her point blank, "How many monitoring cameras are in this room?"

The operative was taken aback by the question. "What do you mean, Commander?"

Shepard looked at her, shaking her head. "You think I'm an idiot? I know you're going to monitor your 'experiment' so don't treat me like a fool. How many?"

Lawson shrugged. "Three cameras; one monitoring entry, one in the office and a wide angle facing the living room and the steps up. The bed and the bathroom are not monitored."

Shepard sighed. "Video only, or do they include sound?"

Operative Lawson shook her head. "There are separate audio receptors that cover the entire space...For what it's worth, I'm sorry, Commander, but I'm sure you understand the necessity. At least at the beginning. Perhaps later, we'll be able to cut back a bit."

Shepard just grumped, "Save it, Lawson. I get it. I'm a four billion credit lab rat. Surprise, surprise. Feel free to go do whatever it is you do. Thanks for the tour. I'm going to review the dossiers, then walk around and get to know the crew a bit. Give me a two-hour out call for Omega."

"As you wish, Shepard. But do try to get some sleep in there somewhere. Your body still needs to finish healing, since your recovery was so rudely interrupted by Dr Wilson."

After Lawson left, Shepard sat at her desk and pulled up the dossiers. The first she reviewed belonged to Mordin Solus, the Salarian scientist. He actually did sound pretty good, being both a biological weapons expert and a member of the STG, so Shepard committed herself to getting him on board. Wonder if he knows Kirrahe, and what the heck is he doing running a clinic on Omega? She did a quick review of the other dossiers, and realized that two other potential crew in addition to Solus were also located at Omega; a mercenary and respected bounty hunter by the name of Zaeed Massani, and a small-unit mercenary commander, codename Archangel. Christ, not even a real name? How the hell am I supposed to find him? Their dossiers were somewhat slim, but since she would be on Omega anyway, Shepard saw no reason to not check them out. None of the other current dossiers had any mention of Omega, so the commander decided to take her first crew-walk aboard the Normandy SR-2.

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Immediately out of the elevator on Deck 2 was Yeoman Kelly Chambers. She initially thought
she was pleasant enough, and they actually looked a lot alike; Kelly could be her younger sister.
Kelly's degree in psychology was an added bonus for completing the crew evaluations, but Shepard
had her fill of psychological evaluations in her Alliance career and figured she'd steer clear of
personal discussions with the Yeoman. Shepard was convinced any findings would go straight to
TIM, and maybe make a stop with Operative Lawson along the way. No need to add fuel to the fire.
Besides, the more they talked, the more Shepard thought either Kelly had a severe case of hero
worship, or part of her unofficial duties were to get close to the commander; just how close was still
up for debate. Either way, after speaking with Kelly, Shepard had the feeling that she needed to
focus on keeping their relationship strictly professional. She normally liked to get one-on-one with
her crew, but felt that would not be a wise path with the young Yeoman.

After shedding herself of Yeoman Chambers, Shepard headed to the bridge to chat with Joker. He
was ecstatic with the new Normandy. The minute she stepped onto the bridge, he swiveled his chair
around, exclaiming, "Can you believe this, Commander? It's my baby, better than new! It fits me like
a glove! And leather seats!" He continued to rant on about how wonderful the new ship was until
Edi spoke up. At that point, Jeff looked at the little blue pop-up hologram and said, "And there's the
downside. I liked the Normandy when she was beautiful and quiet. Now she's got this thing I don't
want to talk about. It's like ship cancer."

Shepard just shook her head. "Joker, it's Cerberus. What do you expect? We still need to move ahead
with the mission and use their resources, but it doesn't mean we need to trust them. Keep your eyes
and ears open, and your mouth closed. Oh, and Joker? A word of advice...if there's an abandon ship
call on this Normandy, get your ass to the escape pod. I'm not staying behind for you a second time."

Joker looked at her for a second before responding. "Way to kill my mood, Shepard. Anyway... as
far as Cerberus goes, you're probably right. I guess it's hard to argue when they install an AI to spy
on us... but the seats are real leather!"

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on us... but the seats are real leather!"

Shepard just looked at him before she left the Bridge, "Good to see you're keeping it all in
perspective, Joker."

Though interested in eventually comparing the new Hammerhead to the Jiris she and Liara had on
their private transport, Shepard saw no immediate reason to revisit the hangar deck, so headed down
to Engineering. When she walked in, Engineer Donnelly turned around in amazement. "You came
call on this Normandy, get your ass to the escape pod. I'm not staying behind for you a second time."

Before Shepard had any chance to respond, Engineer Daniels snapped a smart salute and exclaimed,
"You're speaking to our commanding officer!"

Shepard laughed lightly and responded, "Relax, Daniels, I'm just touring the ship and getting to
know my crew." It quickly became evident that Donnelly was much more laid back than Daniels and
not very military oriented, so Shepard queried how they got assigned to the Normandy. She was
surprised to find they were both prior Alliance, had graduated from the same engineering technical
class, and had been stationed together on the SSV Perugia during the Battle of the Citadel. After the
original Normandy was destroyed, Donnelly was very vocal about the Alliance attempts to discredit
Shepard's belief in the Reapers and landed himself in hot water with the military; it also got him the
invitation from the Illusive Man. While less vocal, Daniels held the same beliefs and liked working
with Donnelly, so followed him to Cerberus. With the Normandy's state-of-the-art technology and
Cerberus seeming to be the only organization taking continued action against the Reapers, they both
thought it was a relatively easy decision. Before the commander left them, she asked if they were
lacking anything they needed. The two engineers said they had everything, but Donnelly admitted
their daily maintenance could be greatly reduced if they had some improved field bleed attenuators
for the primary power transfer system array. Shepard raised her eyebrows and said, "Ok, you want to
pass that by me again, in a form I can actually understand?" Engineer Daniels simplified it immensely, telling the commander they needed a pair of T6-FBA couplings, and Donnelly expanded on the issue, informing the commander that it was a discontinued item and would probably only be found in a used parts market like what they might find on Omega. Before she headed up to Deck 3, Shepard promised the two engineers she would look for the couplings while on station.

Deck 3 was actually a pretty nice living space for a frigate class vessel; it definitely showed the civilian touch for the included comforts. The starboard observation lounge had a small library and the portside lounge had a small entertainment center and a bar. On her way to visit Operative Lawson, Shepard spoke with the Mess Sergeant, and he seemed rather personable, if not just a little bit odd. As long as he could cook, Shepard didn't really care. When she asked if he needed anything, he actually coughed up a shopping list of ingredients that would greatly improve the quality of the meals he could provide. Shepard figured with the task they had set before them, coming back to a good meal was well worth the trouble of a shopping trip, so willingly added it to her list of things to do.

Miranda looked up as Shepard entered her office, closing down the terminal she was working on. "Commander. What can I do for you?"

They had a brief chat about the XO responsibilities aboard the Normandy, and Shepard mentioned the T6-FBA couplings. "And it's not just the couplings, Miranda. I want you to maintain an ongoing upgrade program. I want ideas from every new person we bring on board, any new technology we run across...if it has any application to the Normandy to improve weapons, armor, engine efficiency, whatever; I want it. Get the crew thinking...I want to bring the best damn ship we can bring to the fight with the Collectors."

Miranda nodded as she spoke, "I'll make a point of it, Commander. I think that's an excellent idea."

Once they were done talking business, Shepard asked Miranda about herself. The operative hadn't been very forthcoming when Shepard tried to speak to her before Freedom's Progress, but if they were going to be working together, the commander figured she had the right to know who she was working with. Surprisingly enough, Miranda agreed and gave her a quick rundown. "Well, you should probably know I've had extensive genetic modification. Not my decision, but I make the most of it; I'm very good at just about anything I choose to do."

At that comment, Shepard shifted her weight to one leg and crossed her arms over her chest. "You certainly don't lack for confidence."

Miranda stood up and placed a hand on her hip, continuing, "It's just a fact. My reflexes, my strength, even my looks...they're all designed to give me an edge. No point in hiding from it. It's the reason I'm trusted to oversee the most dangerous, risky and technically demanding operations Cerberus undertakes. It's why I'm here. It's my job to make sure you succeed, Shepard."

Shepard got very curious, "So, what kinds of enhanced abilities are we talking about, and how does it compare to what you did to me?"

Miranda took pride in her work, and was happy to explain. "It's very thorough, you even more so than me because your technology is newer, so it's even more advanced. Physically, we're superior in many ways; I already mentioned improved strength and reflexes, and you already know you have an alloy-enhanced skeletal system to improve your bone strength; it should greatly improve the effectiveness of your Vanguard-charge. Plus, we both heal faster and age slower than average humans, and our biotics are augmented, so while not up to Asari standards, still much stronger than normal human biotics."
Shepard uncrossed her arms and stood up straight, her complete focus on Miranda's statement. "In our line of work, healing fast is good, but can you define 'age slower than average humans' for me, please?"

Miranda shrugged and replied, "Certainly. I'll probably live half again as long as the average human, so instead of 150, I probably have a 225-year lifespan. You, I'm not exactly sure yet. Your technology has a ten-year jump on mine, and I'm sure you probably realize the kinds of improvements that can be made in a ten-year timeframe in the world of technology. A conservative estimate is probably 400 years, but the technology is untested, so we'll have to monitor the nanite effectiveness to get a more accurate estimate. I won't even guess at the potential until I have more data."

Miranda was so matter-of-fact, but Shepard was staggered by the statement. "You... wait... 400? And that's conservative?"

"Yes, Commander. We'll have a better idea after a few missions; when you've put some stress on the nanites and we can get more complete data. Sorry, you seem a bit shocked... I should have anticipated that and delivered that news a bit more gently. I apologize. Are you alright, Commander?"

Shepard stared at Lawson for a couple of seconds before responding. "I... uh... yeah. I'll be fine. Just a bit to take in, is all." Shepard blinked a couple of times and ran her hand through her hair before she continued. "I'm sure I'll have more questions, but, um, that kind of blew me away, so I'll come back when I can think of 'em."

Miranda looked at her appraisingly, "Of course, Commander. Whenever you're ready, I'll be here to answer what I can."

Shepard started to leave the room but then turned one last time to the operative. "Oh, and Miranda... thanks again. For bringing me back... and doing whatever it was you did." With that, Samantha left the room and headed to the med bay to see Karin.

Shepard walked into the med bay still reeling from the news. Karin sensed her disquiet and stood to meet her in the doorway, sounding concerned as she spoke, "Shepard? Are you alright?"

Shepard looked at Karin and started their conversation with "I think I need to sit down." She then went on to tell Karin about her conversation with Miranda. Karin listened very carefully to everything Shepard had to say, assuring the commander that she would speak to Operative Lawson and get a full medical profile to ensure she established appropriate treatment protocols for her obviously modified physiology. When they exhausted the topic, Shepard put a grin on her face and spoke to Karin as a friend, instead of her doctor. She asked her why she left the Alliance after all her years of service and how she ended up with Cerberus. Karin's answers weren't much different than what she'd heard from everyone else. The Alliance broke up the crew and Karin got a ground assignment. Shepard knew how much Karin loved working shipboard and how discontented she must have been at the Mars Naval Medical Center.

"You know me, Commander. I'm used to the hum of engines, the creaking of bulkheads, that subtle vertigo when the momentum dampeners kick in. Life planet-side is too static, too boring. But I didn't come here for Cerberus, Commander. I came here for you. I have faith that your dealings with Cerberus will be ethical. I trust you, Commander. And knowing your propensity for getting injured, how could I leave you in anyone else's hands?" Doc Chakwas laughed as she finished her explanation.

Shepard looked at the floor for a brief moment, before meeting Karin's eyes for her next question.
"You laugh, Karin, but you must know there's a good chance this mission is a one-way trip. Are you ready for that?" Shepard's eyes were glassy as she contemplated the sacrifice her friend was apparently willing to make for her.

Karin answered earnestly, "Shepard. I've been through the reclaiming of Shanxi, the Skyllian Blitz... and we survived the Battle of the Citadel and the destruction of the Normandy together. I've lived a full life with no regrets. I'd like to be sure this crew gets the same opportunity."

Shepard sighed, "Thanks, Karin. Most of this crew has no idea how lucky they are to have you here. Is there anything you need? Anything to make your job easier?"

Karin smiled gently. "I believe I have everything I need. Feels a lot like my sick bay on the original Normandy... it's like coming home. The only thing missing are my private reserves. I even had a bottle of Serrice Ice Brandy I was saving for a special occasion."

Shepard laughed. "And you didn't replace it before you came on board? Shame on you, Doctor! I'll keep an eye out for a replacement bottle... and maybe a few other things to add to the stock. Thanks for your time, Karin. I'll see you around."

After saying their goodbyes, Shepard retreated to her new cabin on Deck 1, or to 'the loft' as much of the crew referred to it. She stepped in the door, still amazed by the size and furnishings within the room, and made her way to the private terminal on her desk. There were a lot of messages stacked up, but a lot of them were information only on available weapons and armors, so they were a quick read. There were a couple that definitely caught her interest, particularly one from Anderson. He wanted her to come see him at the Citadel, so she made up her mind that would be their first stop after Omega. The other was information on the location of the Normandy crash on Alchera. Like I need them to tell me where I died... I'm pretty sure that planet is marked indelibly in my brain, thank you very much! As she read on, she realized that identifying the location was just a weak introduction to a request for assistance. They wanted her to go and account for twenty crewmembers. Shepard couldn't believe her eyes; it had been two years, and the Alliance hadn't bothered to go to the crash site to account for their personnel. What about 'leave no one behind'? Twenty crew members' families were still in the dark as to the final resting place of their loved ones. She planned on making that a priority topic when she spoke to Councilor Anderson. Shepard slammed the terminal closed and stood up in a rage. What the fuck is going on in the Alliance? Blowing off the Reapers was bad enough; she could understand how they didn't want to face the possibility of the end of life, but ignoring the deaths of twenty Alliance personnel?

Shepard paced around her room, fuming in anger at the stupidity of the Alliance. She was putting together quite the list of grievances. They picked up the Normandy rescue pods, but apparently couldn't take the time to find her... but Cerberus somehow managed. She'd heard nothing but bad from prior Alliance personnel as to how they were treated after her death. They were apparently completely ignoring the threat that got her killed, and in two years time, they still hadn't managed to close out next of kin notifications after the crash. Shepard stopped in the middle of the room, put her hands on her hips, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Next of kin notifications... "Fuck!" She opened her eyes and headed back to the med bay; she'd been so rattled by Miranda's revelations, she'd not asked Karin most of the questions she'd intended.

After listening to the commander's rants and questions, Karin was very straightforward. "I'm sorry, Commander, but I don't know what to say. You now understand the frustration and why so many of the crew went their own way. None of us were happy with the aftermath. My only regret is that I did not keep in touch with Liara. I wish I knew the answers to your questions in that regard... I can see how frustrating it must be for you. I know you'll take us to Illium as soon as the mission allows. I can help you with your mother, though, I've kept in frequent contact with her. She's between ships,
moving from the Kilimanjaro to become the Captain on the flagship of the Fifth Fleet, the Orizaba. It's a great promotion and good move for her. If you send a message there, I'm sure they'll hold it for her."

Shepard thanked Karin for her time and headed back to her cabin once more, this time going to the personal terminal near the bed. She sat down and drafted a very short note to her mother, sure it would get reviewed, and maybe not even be sent, but she did it anyway.

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Mom,

Wish I could say more, but I'm not sure as to classification protocols on this one. Just know I'm alive and kicking, in good health and have Karin to take care of me. I plan on being on the Citadel soon. I'll give you a date as soon as I get one, hoping to meet you there. For everything you've gone through the last two years... sorry just doesn't cut it, but I don't know what else to say here. Heard about the Orizaba. Congrats! Love you. Don't know if a reply will get through, but feel free to try.

Keep the Faith!

Sam

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Shepard wished she could do the same with Liara, but there was too much to say, and Liara wouldn't understand such brevity and could possibly take it the wrong way. Besides, Cerberus had no rights to that conversation and Shepard had to figure out some other way to communicate with her bondmate. As she stretched out on the bed she realized there was a huge view portal in the ceiling that allowed her to see outside the ship as it traversed the galaxy. She spent a large portion of her first night on the Normandy SR-2 watching the stars go by. Feeling like the goal of rejoining the Alliance was slipping farther away and having to endure the frustration of being unable to contact her love and anchor, sleep was a long time coming.
What Goes Around

The new bartender at Eternity, the casual bar on Illium, knew something had changed, but couldn't confirm what. Sha'ira had made her scheduled visit and Liara had seemed in a better mood in the weeks following. Aethyta had bugged Liara's office and her primary terminal, so she knew the personal crusade against Captain Mikhailovich had finally borne fruit. Aethyta was proud of her girl; instead of having the woman killed, Liara had actually turned the evidence over to the Alliance and they had initiated an investigation, forcing the woman to retire at the reduced rank of Commander. Aethyta had sighed when she'd heard the announcement and was glad Liara was content with the results. *I would have killed the bitch and not given it a second thought.* Liara was a better person than that, and Aethyta was proud to be her father. But the fact that the Captain lost her lifelong career was not near enough to explain Liara's extreme change of mood.

As usual, Liara had worked late the night prior. Unusual was that she received a call from one of her prior shipmates, the Quarian, Tali'Zorah. Tali had been vague, Liara had promised to call from home, and immediately closed up the office and left, obviously to finish the conversation from her secure home network. Aethyta had not yet been able to bug the home systems. It was Nezzie's old apartment, but Liara had put three overlapping layers of encryption on the damn door lock, and Aethyta had yet to crack the new codes. All Aethyta knew was that the next morning when Liara walked into work, she positively glowed. Her voice carried a tone Aethyta had never heard and she knew exactly what it meant. Liara was incredibly happy and given the current state of affairs, there was only one thing in the galaxy that could cause it. Aethyta was sure Liara had gotten word that Shepard was alive, but she had no proof. It was great news, but 'My girl is walking on air and happier than I've ever seen her' was not exactly material for a report to the councilor. At the moment, it was all Aethyta had and for her, it was enough.

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Archangel sat in the crow's nest with his sniper rifle, picking off mercenary fodder like there would be no tomorrow. Of course, if this kept up too much longer, that could *actually* become a very distinct possibility. Who knew he'd piss them off so bad that all three main mercenary groups on Omega would actually team up to take him down; it was unprecedented! Those groups never cooperated. Archangel sighed, "Guess I should never say never" as he contemplated just how he got into this mess. He had been angry and frustrated; disgusted with recent turns in his life when he saw that damn Vorcha mugging an elderly human couple. He stepped in and stopped it and the old woman had called him a 'real-life angel.' Later that evening, he was at a bar called Afterlife, telling his story, when he ran into a couple of similar minded folk who were also tired of less savory characters taking advantage of the defenseless and they decided to do something about it. Because of the elderly woman's comment, he decided to call himself 'Archangel' and it wasn't long before others were drawn to the cause and their squad soon numbered an even dozen.

The squad declared war on Omega's criminal elements, and a place like Omega certainly had no shortage. As long as they didn't impact any of Aria T'Loak's business transactions, the Pirate Queen could care less, so they were careful to stay off her radar. The squad was well rounded, with snipers, tech experts, a couple of biotics and a variety of skilled former mercenaries, including a Salarian explosives expert. There was practically no job they weren't willing to tackle, and they even picked up some special high paying security and escort jobs that earned them quite a few credits. They were doing so well that some members of the squad had actually started talking about settling down and living good with their portion of the profits. Then they got word that their team was in the crosshairs; they had made such a name for themselves the three main gangs on Omega, the Blue Suns, the Blood Pack and Eclipse, had all decided to work together to take the vigilante group down.

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Somewhere along the way during the course of the Omega gangs' retaliatory strikes, Archangel's second in command, a Turian named Lantar Sidonis, was captured and forced to lay a trap for the squad. Sidonis was coerced to provide Archangel a false lead on a Blood Pack gun running operation, and while Archangel was gone checking it out, a combined gang team bombed the squad's hideout and then gunned down anyone who survived the blast. By the time Archangel returned, ten members of the squad were dead and Sidonis was nowhere to be found. The gangs pursued Archangel, intent on finishing off the squad completely. Archangel finally found a good defensible position with only one readily available way in and out and decided to make his last stand, hoping the gangs got tired of dying in the chokepoint before he ran out of thermal clips. So, there he sat in the crow's nest with his sniper rifle, wondering just how much longer he was going to last when he spotted a familiar splash of auburn hair through his scope. Well I'll be damned. My odds just got a whole lot better.

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Hannah was sitting on a beach in Rio enjoying the last few days of her leave period between assignments when her omnitool chimed. Glancing at it, she suddenly bolted upright and opened the message. Liara! It's about damn time, girl! Where the hell have you been? So many questions ran through her head and only one of them got an answer as she read through the extremely vague
message. She typed an extremely short reply that was not nearly as ambiguous. 'On Earth, on leave, between assignments...will try to be on Illium tomorrow evening. See you soon. Love!' Hannah stood up, picked up her belongings and returned to her visiting officer's quarters at Vita Militar to pack and arrange for shuttle transport. She had been staring at the surf, reminiscing about visiting 'The Villa' while Samantha had been in Rio de Janeiro going through her N-School training at the Interplanetary Combatives Academy. Sam had always loved the sounds of a night beach; the quiet calls of night birds and the soft sound of a gentle surf on the shore. Hannah's tranquil thoughts were interrupted by fears of what was so important that Liara had broken her self-imposed exile to contact her. The Asari hadn't even attended Samantha's memorial service. All Hannah could think was that Liara had discovered something about the Reapers or found some information on the colonial disappearances in the Terminus. God, I hope those two thoughts aren't connected! Hannah suddenly found herself packing with a bit more urgency, eager to see Liara and yet... not.

Matriarch Aethyta was sound asleep when the insistent chiming of her omnitool woke her. She was going to ignore it until she realized it was Mozia. She cursed under her breath and hit the accept key. "What the hell you want, Mozia? You know how early it is here?"

Mozia laughed, "Thyta. It's 10AM. That's not exactly early."

Aethyta growled. "It is when I work a bar job that doesn't end until three and because of 'other assigned duties' I didn't get to bed until nine... Shit! I'm too old for this. What's up?"

"Sorry, dearest. I honestly did forget about your odd hours, but I think this is important." Mozia then went on to explain the unexpected request she had received from Liara. "Do you think this is delayed fallout from Sha'ira's visit, or has something happened there?"

Aethyta sat up...things were starting to come together, so she explained to Mozia what little she knew about the call from Tali'Zorah and Liara's subsequent reaction. "I guessed she'd heard something about Shepard, but had nothing to confirm it. The girl's good at keeping secrets... This, however...this certainly puts a positive spin on things. Pretty sure we can say Shepard is alive and kickin' and Liara is preparing to return her stuff to her. I'll try to find out if she's making any travel plans."

Mozia agreed with Aethyta's assessment and said she'd pass on their suspicions to Tevos. "I'll send one of the commandos to deliver the personal effects, and see if they can find anything out while they are on Illium. I'm sure she'll have a need to quench her thirst while visiting. You can exchange updated information then. Thanks for your time, Thyta. Get some more sleep, dear."

Aethyta grumbled, "Like I can sleep now, with all this shit running through my head? Gonna be a long day if I don't, though... thanks, Mozia." Matriarch Mozia was laughing as she signed off.

Back in her office the next day, Liara caught herself humming as she went through her data feeds. She felt better than she had in a long time, with good reason, but was a bit apprehensive about meeting Hannah again after such a long silence. Liara could imagine nothing but the woman being very angry with her for disappearing after Shepard's 'death.' Her good mood vanished as she contemplated just how she was going to explain everything. Her thoughts were interrupted by a chirp of her omnitool indicating a message from Riana. Hannah's shuttle would be arriving at 8PM...along with an 'accompanied' shipment from Armali. Liara sat back in her chair; that was... unexpected. She had given no indication to Matriarch Mozia that she wanted or needed express shipment of the articles, nor that they needed to be hand delivered by one of the commandos! Liara typed a quick
message to both Riana and Judea and explained that she needed private time with Captain Shepard, so Judea and their unexpected visitor would bunk on the Aletheia for the night while Riana escorted the Captain and the cargo to the apartment. Liara added a note for Judea. *Feel free to take Huntress Shasia out for food and drink at Eternity and see if you can find out the real reason she is here. Brokerage expense account. Have a good time...*

With everything going on, Liara almost overlooked a short note from one of her better Salarian information agents. He had used one of the heavily classified encryptions, and even once decrypted, the message was still not plain text. It contained a separate code word to indicate the existence of a Shadow Broker agent on Illium. The open text following indicated the Broker agent was simply known as the Observer. For the Salarian to use triple safeguards, he must believe their message system to be compromised. Liara very carefully manually transcribed all the decrypted data to an unlinked data pad, ensuring none of the text she typed would compromise either of the encryption or decryption algorithms used. Once completed and triple-checked, Liara deleted the original message and ran the scrubber program. Having a direct agent on Illium was bad, but it also provided an extraordinary opportunity. The Observer was no intermediary; there was no extra level of protection. If Liara could identify this agent, it would be the most direct link to the Shadow Broker she will have found since the start of her hunt.

Liara called Nyxeris into her office, informed her of the new information and handed her the datapad. "Please put your talents to use to track down some leads on this. To have a Shadow Broker agent so close is not good, so consider this your top priority. We must be extra vigilant until we have identified the threat. Please be careful, and as I know you can be, certainly be discrete." After her assistant had read through the data pad, Liara made sure she had no questions on the task and sent her on her way. As soon as Nyxeris left the office, Liara locked the door and pulled up her detection program on her omnitool, putting it to work scanning the office. It would be time consuming, but with a local agent in the immediate vicinity, Liara added it on her personal task list to accomplish a scan every three days. This was a very special program, designed specifically for her by Tali, and Liara trusted no one else with the precise coding the program contained; it was exceptionally thorough. By the time it was done, Liara had discovered every one of her office terminals had been bugged, plus there was an audio capture device planted on an upper corner of one of the windows, virtually invisible to the naked eye. Every one of them transmitted through a random multi-hop program, and every time the back-trace program got to the third node, the nodes self-destructed, terminating the trace. Whoever had done this was a professional...but Tali was better.

Across Illium in the residential section an omnitool chirped. Chirped again. Chirped again. Chirped a fourth time and fell silent. A bleary-eyed Matriarch squinted at the messages and sat up in her bed. "Fuck!" All three terminal taps and her audio device had been discovered, traced and burned. Aethyta fell back onto her bed; she was back to ground zero on monitoring that damned illusive Liara T'Soni. That girl was, at the very least, as smart as her mother, and she was also starting to be a pain in the ass.

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Morning came early for Shepard, her night's rest too short after spending most of the night wondering what stars Liara was looking at. When she did finally find sleep, it was disturbed by dreams of being unable to breathe in the black expanse of space. Sometimes she was able to redirect her thoughts to the Thessia beach, but last night was not one of those times. She groaned as she rolled to the side of the bed and dropped her legs over the side, slapping at her omnitool to make the alarm shut up. She got up and dressed, not even caring if Miranda was watching. She wished she knew the exact camera placement just so she could stare at it in an attempt to make Miranda uncomfortable with the intrusion while she dressed. Instead, she just faced the wall and tried to ignore the world. She put on her armor and headed down to the mess, saying hello to Gardner and
grabbing something that resembled scrambled eggs and bacon and a large cup of coffee. Taking a large swig, Shepard immediately spewed it out over the table she was sitting at. "Ahhhg! What is this?" she yelled.

Mess Sergeant Gardner laughed, "That's black Pekoe tea, ma'am."

Shepard practically threw the cup at him. "Tell me you actually have coffee on this God forsaken boat!" Gardner pointed at a hot water dispenser and instant coffee packs. Shepard stood up and glared at him. "If you want to survive more than the next 48 hours, we will find a brew pot and coffee somewhere on Omega and it will be on this ship before we depart the station. I don't care how much it costs, but I am NOT drinking instant coffee. Ever. Am I being perfectly clear, Mess Sergeant?"

Gardner dropped what he was doing and stood at attention, shouting, "Ma'am, yes Ma'am!"

Everyone around the table who hadn't gotten tea spit all over them sniggered, but stopped as soon as the commander's glare swept the table. Suddenly not wanting to eat with the group, Shepard dumped her entire plate into the trash disposal, grabbed a few packs of battle rations, and stomped to the elevator to head to the armory.

Miranda and Jacob were already there prepping weapons, and fell silent when Shepard entered the room. Sensing her foul mood, Miranda ventured forth with a question, "Everything ok, Shepard?"

Shepard glared at her. "No. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and this stupid ship has an AI and leather seats but ya'all couldn't install a real coffee pot?" Shepard grabbed an Eviscerator shotgun, a Locust submachine gun, and a Phalanx heavy pistol, docked them on the hardpoints on her armor and grabbed as many thermal clips as she had storage for. Saying, "Let's get this done," she immediately headed for the airlock as Miranda and Jacob scrambled to dock their weapons and catch up.

As soon as they entered Omega station, a jittery Salarian showed up welcoming them to Omega. He hadn't gotten very far in his introduction when a Batarian showed up and chased him off. The Batarian, named Moklan, looked the group over and then faced the commander. "Blasted scavengers. Welcome to Omega... Shepard."

The commander just looked at him and queried, "You know who I am?"

Moklan shrugged his shoulders and answered almost dismissively, "Of course. We had you tagged the moment you entered the Terminus Systems. You're not as subtle as you think." He was basically just a message boy, sent by Aria because she wanted to see the 'dead' Spectre. Shepard waved him off, and figured she'd get around to Aria eventually, but she had some things to accomplish first. The passageway from the docks to Omega proper was actually pretty quiet, so Shepard took advantage of it to dole out orders. She sent Jacob down to the shopping district to get any mods and upgrades he could find and told him specifically to find a pair of the T6-FBA couplings, coffee and a brew pot. Edi transmitted over the comm that there was a quarantine warning in the slums where Dr Solus ran his clinic and to anticipate resistance at the transport station because the area was locked down. She then added information about a mercenary recruiting station in Afterlife that was looking for volunteers to go after Archangel.

Shepard stopped and looked at Miranda. "Looks like we'll go see Aria after all. Probably need her permission to go into the quarantine zone, and the recruiter is in her bar, so I imagine she'd be a bit pissed if we walked into the joint and then ignored the queen."

Miranda nodded in agreement. "I agree, Commander. However, before we go anywhere, that mercenary right at the end of the hall bears a striking resemblance to the dossier photo of Zaeed Massani. Shepard glanced down to where Miranda had pointed and saw a merc beating the crap out
As she approached, the Batarian begged for help. Zaeed backhanded him, saying, "No one said you could talk, jackass!" It didn't take much time to establish that the Batarian was a bounty, and Zaeed was a no bullshit kind of guy who knew his business and knew how to handle himself. What TIM had neglected to put in the dossier was that Zaeed had accepted another mission before signing with the Normandy, to deal with some Blue Suns who had taken over a refinery. Shepard agreed that if it was part of the deal, she'd make it happen as soon as there was a break in the mission schedule, but couldn't guarantee when it would be. Zaeed shook her hand and agreed, but pressed that he preferred it be sooner rather than later.

Shepard spoke plainly, "We'll get to it when we get to it, Zaeed. Can't promise you anything else. Now, turn that bounty in and meet me in front of Afterlife. While you're doing that, I've got to talk to Aria." With that, Shepard and Miranda walked into Omega proper. When they walked in the door, Shepard wasn't sure what was worse, the noise or the smell. At least Afterlife was easy to find, as it was direct in front of the dock entrance. Shepard guessed Aria wanted her 'guests' to not have any excuse for not finding her right away. There was a waiting line to get in the door, but the commander blew it off; after all, the Queen had summoned her.

The doors to Afterlife opened and Shepard was transported to another world. Inside was loud music with a throbbing beat, and multiple exotic Asari dancers were working their own rhythms, either on a pole or private table dances. Shepard instantly understood where all the misconceptions about Asari sexual promiscuity came from; places like this. Shepard passed a bar, then stopped and backed up, asking the bartender if they just happened to carry Serrice Ice Brandy. They did, so Sam paid for a couple bottles to be delivered to Dr Chakwas aboard the Normandy. They then proceeded to the back of the room; as soon as Shepard had walked in she had noticed the elevated viewing platform at the rear of the club. She was sure the Queen's throne was up there, with a commanding view of the entire establishment. As she came up the last set of stairs and saw a sole Asari standing alone, she knew it was Aria. Her assumption was confirmed when the Asari spoke. "That's close enough."

Aria's guards all drew weapons, but Shepard just looked at them all with disdain, doing nothing. After a few tense seconds, the smallest nod of Aria's head made them all stand down and one of them directed Shepard to stand still so he could scan her. As he waved a scanner in her face, Shepard grabbed the front of the collar on his armor, pulling him close. "Try it, and you'll be scanning the inside of your colon."

Aria laughed quietly as she said, "I'd almost pay to see that." Then her voice got serious again as she finished, "But it's not an option. You want to talk, you get scanned. Can't be too careful with dead Spectres. That could be anyone wearing your face."

Shepard pointed at Aria and said, "I was told you were the person to talk to if I had questions." At that, Aria turned around. She had very distinct facial tattoos, and Shepard thought she was actually very attractive, and not just physically. She held an aura of power that had been earned over centuries of experience, a stark contrast to Liara's tranquil beauty. Where Liara's aura spoke of serene empathy, Aria's spoke of controlled rage; they could not be more polar opposites. Shepard snorted to herself, thinking the last thing she needed in her life was more rage.

Aria invited Shepard to sit, which she did, and after Aria highlighted Shepard's miniscule import in Aria's domain, they engaged in conversation about Solus and Archangel. Because the team figured they'd make more than a few enemies while retrieving Archangel, they decided to save him for last so they could beat a hasty retreat should the need arise. That meant they were headed after Solus in the quarantine zone first. Being a space station, each of Omega's outer zones was self-contained to prevent catastrophic failure in the event of a breech; it also made it extremely easy to close any
section off, whenever necessary. Aria's quarantine procedures were tight as a drum, so the team was forced to go through the standard entry gates between zones. Once they arrived, they found a Turian guard at the door that required a bit of convincing, but he did provide a bit of information in the process. He confirmed Shepard's suspicions that Mordin was more than a doctor. He had apparently wreaked havoc among the Blue Suns, so he was not just a member of the Salarian STG in name; he could take care of himself quite well. Openly displaying the team's various weapons, Shepard easily convinced the Turian door guard they were well prepared to take on a few mercs, stating, "What you need is to get this problem solved right now. That's what we do... solve problems. Let us in, and we'll get this district straightened out." The large number of shotguns, assault rifles, SMGs and heavy pistols distributed amongst only three people, along with the blue trails of biotic power rolling off the two women's fingertips sold the guard, so he radioed ahead and told the second layer of security they had some 'problem solvers' headed their way, into the zone.

Shepard, Lawson and Massani walked through the door and into a war zone. As gangs competed for territory, the plague was the least of their worries. Immediately inside the door were two Blue Suns which Shepard took out with ease. She pulled up her biotics and charged into the first, then blasted the second with her shotgun at short range before turning back to finish off the first one she crashed into with her charge. There was a sick Batarian sitting on the floor, showing initial symptoms of the plague, and after convincing him she was there to help, he had some information on the Clinic. He couldn't get there because of all the gang activity in between so Shepard promised to send help back once she cleared the path; then the team pressed on. They moved through a residential district, and it was evident the Blue Suns were raiding empty rooms, and locking in plague victims so they couldn't spread the disease. It was a cruel way to die and they were given no chance to get to Mordin's clinic. Shepard decided she didn't much like the Blue Suns, and Zaeed's mission was looking more enticing by the minute.

After penetrating the next Blue Suns barricade they ran across, the team stumbled upon a human couple hiding out. They had some insight into the plague; even though Human's were being blamed for the plague, it was the Vorcha who were profiting. They were moving into Blue Suns' territory as the Blue Suns became too weak to defend it. Vorcha weren't smart enough to create the plague, but they could certainly be the agents responsible for spreading it. It also gave the team a heads-up that the closer they got to the clinic, the more Vorcha they would be seeing, instead of the Blue Suns like they had been running into. Shepard couldn't stand Vorcha. They were the vermin of the galaxy; nothing but bipedal rats with big teeth and a nasty disposition. Even on their home world, they had no global government; it was a mess of competing clan chiefs and riddled with tribal warfare. They were formidable adversaries though, with a naturally aggressive disposition, disease resistance and regenerative capabilities.

They did run into one group of Blood Pack before they reached the clinic, with Vorcha, a couple of Krogan and some varren, but found the clinic quickly after blasting their way through the relatively small group. Once they got to the clinic, Mordin was a piece of work; his mouth ran a mile a minute, and he talked to himself constantly. Actually he didn't really talk to himself, it was more of an out loud thought process. Shepard wasn't sure if it helped Mordin think or if he just liked to hear himself speak. She walked up and interrupted his soliloquy by saying his name. He immediately scanned her and started rattling, "Hmm. Don't recognize you from area. Too well-armed to be refugees. No mercenary uniform. Quarantine still in effect. Here for something else. Vorcha? Crew to clean them out? Unlikely. Vorcha a symptom, not a cause. The plague? Investigating possible use as bio-weapon? No. Too many guns, not enough data equipment. Soldiers, not scientists. Yes, yes. Hired guns, maybe? Looking for someone? Yes! But who? Someone important. Valuable. Someone with secrets. Someone like… me."

Shepard had no idea how long he would have continued, so she finally broke his discourse simply by interrupting him. "For the love of the Gods, Mordin, take a breath. I'm Commander Shepard, and
I came here to find you. I'm on a critical mission, and I need your expertise."


"Ever heard of an organization called Cerberus?" When Shepard asked, Mordin's entire demeanor changed; he definitely recognized the name.

When he responded, his tone changed and became lower, more serious, more deliberate. "Crossed paths on occasion. Thought they only worked with Humans. Why request Salarian aid?"

Shepard answered directly, "I'm on a mission to shut down the Collectors, and I need your help."

Mordin dropped back into thinking aloud mode; his hand placed contemplatively on his chin while he considered the possibilities. "Collectors? Interesting. Plague hitting these slums is engineered. Collectors one of few groups with technology to design it. Our goals may be similar. But must stop plague first. Already have a cure. Need to distribute it at environmental control center. Vorcha guarding it. Need to kill them."

Shepard was deadly serious when she responded. "I can take care of the Vorcha and distribute the cure. If I get it done, can you come with me?"

Mordin agreed; then mentioned his assistant Daniel had gone out to distribute the cure and hadn't come back and asked Shepard to keep an eye out for him. In return, Shepard mentioned the sick Batarian out near the entrance, and the human couple that should be straggling in any time. Shepard quickly headed the team out the door to find the environmental control center and hopefully find Daniel somewhere along the way. As they came out into a main foyer, they ran into a huge group of Blood Pack. The group had a number of Krogan and Vorcha carrying flame throwers so Shepard concentrated on them first. She took a couple of serious shots from one Krogan who closed a lot faster than she anticipated, and had to rely on Miranda to cover her ass. It made Shepard realize how much she missed her old team, not necessarily because they were better fighters, but because they had worked together for so long they had established a battle rhythm. This new group lacked experience fighting together, and didn't know yet how to take advantage of each other's strengths. They finally polished the group off, and climbed the stairs they were guarding.

As they reached the top, there were two doors. Door number one revealed three Batarians holding Mordin's assistant Daniel at gunpoint. The Batarians were not pleased, convinced that Humans started the plague and Daniel was in the process of spreading it. Shepard scoffed, "I know you're scared. Of the Vorcha. Of the plague. But this man isn't to blame. If he was spreading the plague, why would he come into Vorcha territory? They're immune." Fortunately, the Batarians were not infected by the plague and still had their full mental faculties, so they saw the logic. Once Shepard promised them free and safe passage, they released their victim and quickly vacated the area. Shepard promptly told the young medic to get his ass back to the clinic; that Mordin needed his help and Daniel had no business being out here without weapons training, at least enough to defend himself. Once he was safely on his way, the team continued on theirs.

Stepping through the next doorway devolved into a protracted hallway by hallway fight, and the team found themselves facing numerous Vorcha, some with rocket launchers, and a Krogan. When they finally battled their way into the Environmental control room, a Blood Pack Vorcha ran out yelling, "You no come here. We shut down machines, break fans! Everyone choke and die! Collectors want plague! Then Collectors make us strong!" Shepard realized Mordin was right when he theorized the Collectors had designed the plague, she just didn't understand why. Not that it mattered at the moment. What did matter was killing the Vorcha so they could get the fans turned back on and the cure distributed via the air circulation system. Shepard started firing, and Zaeed and
Miranda quickly followed suit. Knowing how close they were to completing the mission, Shepard let loose. Her mind flashed back to Eden Prime, when their team was getting close to being overwhelmed and she played ping pong with the husks. She swapped her shotgun for her heavy pistol for the faster fire rate and, once again, she called on her biotic charge and started flying.

It was the first time she really pushed her biotics since her Cerberus augmentation, and the speed at which she was able to recharge and move again was astounding. The Blood Pack never really stood much of a chance. The Vorcha were relatively easy, but even the Krogan had difficulty believing that a puny squishy human could slam into them like a freight train and then finish them off with a pistol shot to their exposed throat. At some point during the fight, Shepard felt something rake across her hip, but being in the middle of a melee with Krogan, she didn’t exactly have time to stop and think about it. After the series of repeated charges, pistol whips and biotic explosions, the room fell deathly quiet. Shepard squatted in the middle of the room, down on one knee, head hanging while trying to catch her breath, on the verge of trembling with exhaustion and thanks to her armor's auto-application of medigel, forgetting all about her hip. Zaeed emerged from cover and spoke with a bit of awe in his voice. "Jesus Fucking Christ, Shepard. In all my years as a merc, I've never seen anything like that."

Shepard chuckled softly, as loudly as her lack of breath would allow. "Not the first time I've heard that, Zaeed. Welcome to the Normandy, the land of misfit warriors." She finally took a deep breath and stood up.

The minute she was on her feet, Miranda came rampaging over, "Shepard! Are you bloody suicidal? What the hell were you thinking? You could have been killed!" Shepard would have laughed, but as she turned to Miranda, she noticed the look on her face was deadly serious. She was getting ready to make some retort when Miranda's face went white. "Oh, God. You've been injured. We need to get you back to the Normandy!" At Shepard's questioning gaze, Miranda blurted out, "Your side, Shepard! Can you not feel that?"

Shepard looked down and saw a huge gash on her right side, starting just below her ribcage and flowing down across her hip. "Hmm. That's gonna leave a mark. Guess we'd better adjust the pain sensors and medigel application system in the armor; settings must be off. Come on, let's head to the clinic and get Mordin. Then we head to the Normandy." Miranda just shook her head in bewilderment as she silently watched Shepard turn and walk away.


Shepard looked at Mordin and declined. "Thanks, Mordin, but no...just throw a quick patch on it and I'll head back to the Normandy. You ready to help us stop the Collectors?"

"Yes, Unexpected to be working with Cerberus. Many surprises. Just need to finish up here, make sure things ready for Daniel to take over clinic. Won't take long. Meet you at your ship. Looking forward to it."

Shepard closed out the conversation, "No hurry. We're docked for a rest period, and then we have more work on station. You have at least six hours. If I'm not available when you arrive, Jacob Taylor can show you to your lab and I'll catch up to you later."

When Shepard got back to the Normandy, she went straight to the med bay. Karin glanced up as soon as she walked in. "I told you not to worry about the brandy, Commander. So instead, you deliver not only one bottle, but two?"
Shepard smiled. "Told you I would. The first one was to fulfill my promise, the second is payment."

Karin quirked an eyebrow questioningly. "Payment, Commander?"

Shepard shed her armor and plopped herself up on an exam table. "Yeah... for this... and a few more I'm sure are headed your way in the future." Shepard waved her hand at her right side as she pulled up her compression shirt and tugged Mordin's temporary bandage off. "I figure keeping you happy might spare me a tongue lashing or two."

As she stood up, Karin smiled and shook her head, saying "Good luck with that, Commander!"

Karin walked over and looked at the torn flesh. She actually laughed, "Well, it's nice to know that some things just never change now, do they, Shepard?" Karin pushed her back on the table and connected a sedative drip. Miranda informed her a standard sedative would be processed too quickly by the commander's system, and she would wake up before Karin was able to complete her work; thus, she required an initial standard dose, plus a continual drip for the duration. The commander would awaken relatively quickly once the drip was discontinued. "Good night, Commander. See you in a couple of hours." Last thing Shepard saw before she fell asleep was Karin, still shaking her head and smiling.
Completing the Circle

Liara ran the detection program one last time and the office came up clean. Satisfied, she opened her newly scrubbed terminals and returned to the data feeds. One of her queries flagged 'Shepard' came back and Liara opened it immediately. It was a video feed from Omega and Liara's heart started to beat a little faster as she queued the video to play. As the video moved forward, Liara watched as a familiar figure emerged into the picture from the Omega docks. Liara reached down and paused the feed and her hand fluttered forward, desiring to reach through the feed to touch the object of her affection as her fingers traced Shepard's outline on the screen in front of her. *By the Goddess, that's really her. The hair, the armor... even the way she walks is the same.* Liara stared at the screen until the tears in her eyes made it too blurry to see. She wiped her eyes clear in frustration and let the video resume. There were a number of different segments, at various points in the station, and the security footage from the Environmental Control Center erased any lingering doubts in Liara's mind. There was no one else in the galaxy who fought like that; the lightening biotic charge with reckless abandon, just to dash again in some unexpected direction before anyone could get a hand on her.

Liara's breath caught when she watched the commander charge the Krogan. *Goddess, Shepard! In all the battles we fought, how many times did you scare me to death doing that?* Liara flashed back to the day she met Shepard and the charge up the ramp out of the volcano... straight into the shotgun of the waiting Krogan BattleMaster. Liara's expression softened, remembering how Shepard protected her, even then, when all that had passed between them was a single spark the first time their eyes had met. She shook her head and brought her attention back to the data feed, watching every second of footage, reveling in the masterful warrior that was Commander Shepard, returned to her from the dead. Liara breathed a sigh of relief when Shepard stood back up at the end of her biotic rampage. The last segment of footage was Shepard back at the dock, this time facing the camera as she walked by. Liara assumed they were on their way back to the Normandy, and she suddenly felt a huge pang of guilt for not being by Shepard's side as she caught a hint of a limp in the Commander's gait. She backed it up and watched it again, then enhanced the footage. She finally found what she was looking for... the Commander had a huge gash in her armor on her right side, and blood spatter ran down her right leg. It was hard to pick up against the dark shadows on the footage but it was definitely there. Liara did not see any indication of when Sam received the wound during the fight, but she had definitely not walked away unscathed. Once again, Liara's hand crept forward and she caressed the screen as her voice, etched with concern, quietly begged, "Oh, Shepard. Please, my love, be safe!"

Hannah's shuttle had arrived, so Liara, Riana and Judea were at the port of entry, waiting on the passengers to disembark. Liara recognized her immediately when she came through the door, though she noted the two years must have been rough on the Captain. Liara noticed more gray in her hair, and as she got closer, she could see the worry lines in her face had gotten deeper. She felt more than a twinge of guilt at being so withdrawn and not keeping in touch better with the woman who had so freely welcomed her into the Shepard family. Liara's hand shot up as she shouted, "Hannah!" and drew her attention. Liara saw a brief flash of... something... cross Hannah's face, to be instantly replaced by a smile as recognition set in. The two crashed together in a huge hug, tears of joy and guilt running in equal measure down Liara's face. They held each other out at arms' length and Hannah said, "Now stop that, or we'll both be bawling like little babes in the woods!"

Liara laughed and wiped the tears from her face, apologizing. "I'm sorry! It's just so good to see you! Do you remember Riana and Judea?"
Hannah was right on top of it, pointing to each in turn, and saying, "Of course! The Huntress and the pilot, yes?"

The two Asari nodded their heads in respect and each said, almost in unison, "It's good to see you again, Captain."

Liara caught sight of Huntress Shasia and waved her over. "Arla! Come! I did not expect you and I am afraid I have company to entertain at the apartment..." Liara glanced at Hanna and finished her thought, "...and we have things to discuss that require privacy. I'm sorry, but I hope you do not mind bunking with Judea on the Aletheia?"

Arla promptly shook her head and responded, "Not at all, Mistress. I know the ship and the accommodations are very nice. I will just be here for two nights. I have some business the Matriarch needed me to conduct on the trading floor tomorrow, and then I will leave on the next morning's shuttle to return to Thessia. Perhaps, if it is not too presumptuous of me, we could at least have lunch tomorrow?"

Liara smiled. "I'm sure we can work something out. Coordinate with Riana, she has my complete schedule." Liara turned to Riana and continued speaking, "And you, Riana...do we have the hovercart and cargo?"

Riana indicated to the positive and then looked at Hannah with a warm smile. "Captain, do you wish to carry your bag, or drop it on the hover? The walk to the apartment is not far, but trust me, the hover will not notice an extra bag."

Hannah laughed. "I'm fine, Riana. It's very light, only a few days worth of clothes. Ready when you are." Being so late, the way was relatively clear and the trio made good time to the apartment, Liara and Hannah settled in quickly to talk.

Liara started. "Hannah, I know you have a million questions, and I know you are probably horribly angry at me for my disappearing act, and I will try to explain the best I can, but first, I must show you something. It will explain a lot, and probably change all the questions you want to ask, so let us just start with my vid and go from there." Liara then showed Hannah the footage from Omega, pausing it just after the big fight where Samantha charged around like a maniac.

Hannah was being the stoic Captain, and keeping her emotions well in check. As she spoke, she could not keep the sadness out of her voice. "I have never seen footage of my Sam in action. She was magnificent wasn't she?"

Liara reached over and held Hannah's hands tightly as she made her next statement. "Hannah, the important news I need to tell you... this video was recorded this morning on Omega. Samantha is alive and fighting." Liara watched a dozen emotions rage instantaneously across Hannah's face before she pulled away from Liara to cover her mouth with a shaking hand.

"Oh... my." Hannah's hand dropped to her lap in shock. "That's why you didn't come to the memorial."

Liara reached over and held Hannah's hands tightly as she made her next statement. "Hannah, the important news I need to tell you... this video was recorded this morning on Omega. Samantha is alive and fighting." Liara watched a dozen emotions rage instantaneously across Hannah's face before she pulled away from Liara to cover her mouth with a shaking hand.

"Oh... my." Hannah's hand dropped to her lap in shock. "That's why you didn't come to the memorial."

Liara shook her head no, fighting tears, waging a war with herself before finally being able to speak. She started in on the slightly modified version of the story she was going to tell, and once it was said aloud it would be hard going back. "No, that's not why I didn't come. I didn't know then. I had doubts. Suspicions. But that was all. I just... I was destroyed. I couldn't accept it. We took the Aletheia to the crash site and never found her body. I didn't believe she was gone, and the Alliance ignored me. I was so angry. It turned out it was a kidnapping gone horribly wrong by the Blue Suns. They had an arrangement with Capt Mikhailovich to purposely abandon the search. Joker is actually
lucky she didn't make it into the pod with him. They probably would have killed him to get to her.”

Liara took a deep breath and continued. "I went to the Alliance and they found no evidence. They ignored me, then they split up the Normandy crew and scattered them to the four winds. After all Shepard had done, the Alliance abandoned her, but I refused to give up. I just recently accumulated enough evidence to present to the Alliance."

Hannah's eyes lit with a fire Liara recognized from Samantha; it was a seething rage, barely contained. Hannah's eyes narrowed as she spoke, tight and controlled. "And the woman just got relieved of duty at a reduced rank? She should have been shot for treason!"

Liara continued. "Yes, but even knowing what happened, I couldn't let her go. I set myself up as an information broker just to track her body down. When I found her, she was actually alive, in a coma at a Cerberus medical facility. It took two years for her to wake up and she has not yet contacted me, though I do not know exactly why. I got this footage through a data feed at my brokerage. I have no idea how she is other than what we can see in the video. I am so sorry, Hannah, that I do not have more information. I want... I need to know too!" As she finished, Liara broke down sobbing.

Hannah hugged the Asari tightly, doing her best to comfort Liara while fighting her own emotions. "Do not apologize, Liara! You have given me the knowledge that my daughter lives and I'll be damned if I'll be sad about any part of that! I'll tell you one thing though. I'm going to contact David Anderson to let him know, and then I'm going to give Admiral Hackett a piece of my mind!"

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The commander woke five hours after Karin finished patching her up, even though the anesthetic had worn off after only two. Shepard was exhausted and natural sleep had taken over when the induced sleep was no longer a factor. She wasn't going to admit it to anyone, but concerns over being out of contact with Liara were making her sleep like shit; there was no nice way to put it. She certainly didn't want to make a habit of it, but getting put under by drugs was at least a way to get started into dream land. Damn it! I've got to figure out how to contact Blue without bringing her under the scrutiny of Cerberus… Finally shaking off sleep, she got up, thanked Karin and headed to the lab, hoping Mordin Solus had come on board. He had taken her literally on her six hour estimate and he and Jacob met her coming out of the elevator on Deck 2; Solus had just come on board. Shepard welcomed him to the Normandy and gestured for Jacob to lead the way to the conference room. Mordin, of course, started talking the second they were on the move. "Very exciting. Cerberus working with aliens. Very unexpected. Illusive Man branching out, maybe? Not so human-centric? Would be good change. Current anti-alien reputation problematic."

Shepard shook her head and warned Mordin that TIM was still very much Humans first. This mission was just too big and they thought Solus was the only one capable of this particular job. Jacob joined the conversation, telling Solus about the Collectors abducting colonists from the Terminus System, yet managing to leave no evidence or any signs of attack. He started to go into more detail, but Shepard cut the discussion short. "The good thing is we don't have to guess about too much. A Quarian collected samples from the last colony hit, Freedom's Progress. I'd like you to analyze them and figure out how the Collectors did it."

Mordin brightened immediately. "Samples? Yes! Very good. Going to need a lab..."

The ever informative Edi immediately responded to Mordin's implied query, "There is a fully-equipped lab immediately adjacent to the briefing room in which you are standing, Professor Solus. If you find anything lacking, please place a requisition order."

Mordin's eyes got big, and he glanced around the room, seeking the source of the voice. "Who's
that? Synthesized voice. Simulated emotional inflections. Could it be... no. Maybe. Have to ask. Is that an AI?" Shepard confirmed his assumption, and told him they called 'her' Edi.

Mordin was amazed. "An AI on board? Non-human crew members? Quarian data collections? Cerberus more desperate than I thought."

Shepard was done. "Mordin! Time's wasting. The Collectors have taken over a hundred thousand colonists and left hardly a trace. We're going to do whatever it takes to find them and stop them. Preferably sooner rather than later! So yes, humanity is a bit desperate right now."

Mordin shook his head. "Understood, Commander. I apologize. Yes, need samples. Need to identify and neutralize stasis technology. Can't risk being captured like colonists. Which way to the lab?"

Shepard let out a sigh and indicated to Jacob to show Mordin the lab and get him anything he needed. She then tapped Miranda and Zaeed; it was time to return to Omega. Miranda was just finishing up an operations report, so they walked to the armory to prep for the mission together. Miranda was surprisingly forthcoming. "I'm impressed, Shepard. So far things have gone exceptionally well. The crew has some great upgrade plans, and Jacob has already outlined some excellent armor modifications. As Cerberus operations go, this is one of the best I've been a part of."

Shepard gave her a glance and responded, "That's because it's not a Cerberus op; it's mine." Miranda immediately got defensive. "Cerberus gave you a second chance, Commander. Maybe you should do the same for us."

Shepard grimaced. "Going to take a long time to build that kind of trust after all the shit I've seen Cerberus do in the name of humanity. Why are you so loyal?" Miranda contemplated not answering, but then agreed, hesitant only because the story was very personal to her. She referred back to their first discussion, about her genetic modifications. She revealed it was done at birth, by her father. He was a narcissistic man who didn't want a daughter, he wanted a dynasty, and Miranda was a tool to that end. Running away from a loveless home, Miranda ended up with Cerberus for protection. Her father would stop at nothing to regain his investment, and Miranda needed an organization that had the power and influence to provide that. Plus, her particular advanced abilities were an improvement to the human genome, and Cerberus approved. She also enjoyed working toward the greater good of humanity over the petty personal ambitions of her ruthless father.

Shepard shook her head in disgust. "They're not much different. The way you describe it, they both treat you like a tool to be used. You are who you are, Miranda. You don't need to make excuses. Your actions speak louder than your DNA."

Miranda was not so easily convinced. "We were both built for greatness, Shepard. The difference is you were great before we rebuilt you. I'm great because of it. Cerberus helps me find meaning in how I was created."

Shepard grumped. "That's bullshit. People find purpose for their lives through their actions, not their associations. Your spirit and your personality are what make you great. It's not what you have; it's what you do with it that matters."

Miranda smiled lightly. "That's kind of you, Shepard. I'm not sure I believe you, but thanks for saying it. Anyway. Speaking of actions... we have a mission to accomplish."

Zaeed had been silent through the whole conversation while they had cleared the docks and gotten ready to enter Omega. His only comment when they stepped through the door was, "About damned time. Damn women, always gotta chat."
They walked back through the still pounding music of Afterlife to the merc recruiter standing before a room to the side of the main dance floor. Shepard sauntered up and simply said, "I hear you're recruiting."

The recruiter gave the group a quick glance and hooked his thumb at the door. "Why don't you step inside?"

They walked in and heard the end of the briefing for the volunteer in front of them. "You'll get paid when the job's done, just like everyone else." The Blue Suns trooper shouted, "Who's next?" He looked up and eyed the commander. "Well, aren't you sweet? You're in the wrong place, honey. Strippers' quarters are that way."

Shepard drew her Phalanx heavy pistol and inspected it while she spoke, "Show me yours, tough guy. Bet mine's bigger."

The Batarian's four eyes all got a little bigger and his voice registered a bit more respect for the woman before him. "Impressive. So you're here to fight, then?" Shepard just raised her eyebrows at his apparent recognition of the obvious, and waited for him to continue.

The merc obliged her, "Standard fee is 500 credits each. You get paid when the job's done. If you die, your friends don't get your share. Need your own weapons and armor. Looks like you've got that covered. And no, this does not make you a member of the Blue Suns, Eclipse, or the Blood Pack. You're a freelancer. Period."

Shepard fished for information, "So, all three merc groups are in on this?"

"Yeah," the trooper shook his head, disgusted. "Damn Archangel's hitting 'em all hard, every month it gets worse. Tarak and the other bosses are tired of losing credits... and men." Shepard continued to fish, "And Tarak is...?"

"Tarak runs the Blue Suns, but all three bosses are involved. They all have a personal stake in the fight. Jeroth's leading the Eclipse and lost a brother to Archangel, and Garm's got the Blood Pack. He's just a typical Krogan and can't stand anyone to get the better of him."

Shepard shook her head in understanding. "Sounds personal. So how are we going about this?"

"You'll get details when you get there, but last I heard, you freelancers were providing a distraction, while the mercs try to sneak past the defenses."

Shepard wasn't real comfortable with being a target dummy for someone who had outlasted three combined major merc groups. "So we're just fodder for his bullets? What do we need to do to get paid?"

The merc laughed. "Dodge fire and survive until someone kills him. Don't like it, don't sign up. Or, survive and get paid. It's easy credits."

Shepard grumped. "If it's easy credits, why can't you do it yourself? What's he got that makes him so tough?"

The merc growled. "He's holed up at his base of operations. He's up in a nest with great lines of sight... and he's a sniper. So you keep him focused, while we sneak in the side. Now, you going or you talking?"
Shepard realized she wasn't going to get any more information from the merc, so she was ready to rumble. "We're going. Where do we catch our ride?"

The merc nodded. "Just head down to the transport depot. One of our boys will take you from there."

As they turned to leave, Shepard watched a young punk walk in, who didn't look a day over twenty, if that. She stopped to watch him. When he spoke, he still sounded like his voice hadn't even changed yet. She glared at him. "How old are you? You look a little young to be a freelance merc."

The boy looked offended as he retorted, "I'm old enough! I grew up on Omega. I know how to use a gun!" He turned and faced Shepard, drawing his weapon. "Besides, I just spend 50 creds on this pistol, and I wanna use it!" Before he could blink, Shepard snatched it out of his hand and banged on the side of it; the thermal clip sparked and fell out on the floor.

"Shit, go get your money back before you get yourself killed. This is a piece of crap." Shepard threw the pistol back at him, bouncing it off his chest.

Zaeed couldn't stand it, laughing derisively as he added, "And you don't even have any armor. You're already dead; you just aren't smart enough to know it." The boy picked up the thermal clip and left the recruitment area, his cheeks flaming in embarrassment.

When they stepped out of the transport, there was another Blue Suns trooper there waiting for them. "About time they sent me someone who actually looks like they can fight. They tell you what you're up against?"

Shepard nodded, "I asked enough questions that I got the basics."

"Alright then. Archangel's up at the end of the boulevard over there. He's up in the nest. It's a killing ground. But he's starting to get tired and starting to make mistakes. We'll have him soon enough."

Shepard was confident. "I'll get to him. Just point me in the right direction."

The merc nodded in appreciation. "I like your attitude, but we've got a plan in place. You're a distraction, not the assault. Head up to the third barricade and talk to Sergeant Cathka for your assignment."

Shepard started to head off, and then asked one last question back over her shoulder. "What do you know about Archangel?"

The merc shrugged. "Me? Nothing. The bosses have been dealing with him for a while now, but don't be surprised if they don't want to talk to a freelancer."

As Shepard moved off, Edi chimed into their comms, "There are heavy mechs and a gunship. They possess considerable firepower. Weaken them before leaving will improve your chances."

Zaeed grunted. "Gunship? This shit just got interesting."

Miranda agreed. "Yes, sounds like we need to do some investigating before finding Cathka." The first door they came to led to a room with a group of Eclipse. Their leader was Jeroth, and he was speaking about the attack plan; send in the light mechs, and if that didn't work then they would send in the heavies. Shepard also caught sight of a data pad with a very interesting message on it. She picked it up, figuring she could use it for leverage. It couldn't hurt to have some good will in the bank.
with Aria T’Loak.

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Tarak,

*I've spoken to Garm, and he and his men are on board. Assuming this operation is successful, we can count on high morale and extensive buy-in from the men. From the losses we've already taken, possibility exists that we won't have enough men needed to continue on to the next objective. It's clear, though, that none of our organizations would be ready to move on Aria without the assistance of the other two.*

Jaroth

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They kept on moving, ended up in a long hall with a choice of doorway. The first room they found had heavy mechs and Shepard took the opportunity to hack into their controls, overriding their ability to identify friend and foe. It wouldn't make the mechs any less dangerous, but at least now they would spend just as much time shooting at the mercs as they did shooting at them... and the mercs would be closer so would receive most of the attention. The second room had the Blood Pack and a very disgruntled Krogan named Garm, who wasn't very friendly and not very forthcoming with information. The Blue Suns' boss was just as unfriendly, so they figured it was time to check in with Cathka. When Shepard found him, he was working on the gunship, but he turned to Shepard when she called his name.

"Ah, good. Just in time. The infiltration team is about to give us the signal. Archangel won't know what hit him. Any questions? This may be your last chance."

Shepard eyed the gunship and gestured at it when she asked, "You going to give us cover?"

Cathka laughed, "Not me. Tarak is the only one who flies her. Besides, she's not quite ready. Archangel gave her a beating last time she was out there. A few more tweaks, she'll be good as new." Cathka's terminal chimed and he launched the next to last team, then turned back to Shepard.

"You guys are next, and then we launch the infiltration team. I gotta get back to work, and you gotta get ready to go." With that, Sergeant Cathka returned to working on the gunship.

Shepard glanced down at an arc welding tool that Cathka had laid down on a table and picked it up; turning it on, she drove it into Cathka's back. As the tool electrocuted the merc, Shepard commented, "You're working too hard. Tarak doesn't really need that gunship at 100 percent." She turned back to her team. "Come on. We'll give these guys a surprise of our own."

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Coming up behind the last team of freelancers, they never knew what hit them. Taking fire from Archangel in the front and Shepard's team from the rear, they didn't have a chance. Shepard advanced quickly up the steps to the upper level where Archangel was dug in. The team went in the door together to confront the single person who had held off three mercenary bands solo. Shepard called his moniker as a greeting, "Archangel?"

Archangel held up a hand to have them wait, while he finished sighting his sniper and took out the last freelancer still alive from the current wave of attacks. He then dropped the barrel of his rifle and slowly turned to greet them, sitting down and removing his helmet. Shepard looked on in amazement as he spoke her name. "Shepard. I thought you were dead."
Hearing him speak broke her shocked paralysis, and she threw her arms open wide and gave him a hug. "Garrus! What are you doing here?"

He shook his head. His voice sounded defeated, tired as he spoke, "Just keeping my skills sharp. A little target practice."

Shepard could hear the strain. She looked at him with concern and asked, "You Ok?" knowing the answer was really 'no' but wondering how he would answer.

Garrus answered, his voice unchanged. "Been better, but it sure is good to see a friendly face. Killing mercs is hard work, especially on my own."

Shepard still couldn't believe her friend was here, and asked him, "What are you doing here on Omega?"

Garrus had disgust in his voice when he answered. "I had a team, job went south, figured I could do more good on my own. At least it's not hard to find criminals here. All I have to do is point my gun and shoot." Shepard suddenly wished she hadn't brought Miranda along. She didn't want anyone connected to Cerberus near her, because she really wanted to ask Garrus about Liara, but didn't dare; it would have to wait. Instead, she just asked what's next. "Well, we got here, but I don't think getting out will be so easy. You have an exit strategy?"

Garrus stood back up. "No, it won't. The limited access has saved my life, funneling all those idiots into my scope, but it works both ways. It also limits our escape route. They'll slaughter us if we try to go out the way you came in."

Miranda scoffed, "So we just sit here and wait for them to take us out?"

Garrus laughed, "It's not all that bad. I held my own solo, and now we have four. I suggest we hold here and wait for a crack in their defenses. It's not a perfect plan, but it's all we got."

Shepard agreed, and then filled Garrus in on the mercs' plan, stepping through mechs, heavy mechs and a gunship. "We disabled the heavy mech's friend and foe identifier, so they'll get torn up more than us when they let loose, and I killed the gunship mechanic, so that won't be back to 100 percent. It might still be flyable though, so we can't count it out."

Garrus' head perked up. "I hear movement. Let's see what their up to..."

They looked over the wall, and realized the Eclipse and their mechs were on the move. They left Garrus at his sniping position and Shepard's team spread out, as Garrus put it, to 'do what you do best'. Garrus chuckled, "Just like old times, Shepard. Let's give these bastards everything we've got!" Shepard immediately rolled out and returned to the stairs, heading down to the lower levels. The mechs and mechs rolled in, but Shepard's team had already penetrated to the main entry, so kept them easily bottled up in the sniping zone for Garrus. It was a drawn out fight simply because of the numbers, but nothing the team didn't handle with ease.

Soon, Shepard saw Jaroth walk out, saying "If you want something done properly... all right. Let's see what their up to..." Shepard watched as a heavy mech was deployed, and she shouted to her team to fall back to the stairs. Jaroth grinned, thinking it was out of fear, not realizing that any remaining Eclipse troops were about to be obliterated with their own heavy mech. Jaroth gave the command, "Go!" and all hell broke loose. The heavy mech stood up, enabled its twin Gatling guns, and started shooting everything in sight. As the last of the Eclipse were wiped out, Shepard concentrated on the mech and finished it off.
She heard Garrus on the radio, "Looks like that's all of 'em. Come find me before they regroup." Shepard did a quick sweep and refilled all her storage pockets with spare thermal clips from all the dead Eclipse mercs, then headed back upstairs to Archangel.

Garrus was definitely more upbeat then when they first found him. He was actually starting to think he was going to survive this after all, "You're kicking ass, Shepard! They barely touched me...and we got Jaroth in the process. I've been hunting that little bastard for months for shipping tainted eezo."

Shepard smiled, "Apparently he's had a stick up his ass since you killed his brother in one of your raids... so, what's next?"

Garrus shook his head, "Brother? No wonder. I knew it was a top lieutenant, I didn't realize he was related. As far as what's next, I don't know. They've heavily fortified the other side, but they're not coming over the wall. What are they waiting for?" Just then, a heavy explosion rocked the building. Garrus reacted immediately. "Been wondering how long it was going to take them to figure that out!"

Miranda looked around, asking, "What the hell was that?"

Garrus answered quickly, "That means they've finally breached the lower level. I've been waiting for them to figure out my back door, and they just did. I'll keep the upper level clear, you'd better get down below, Shepard, and cut off their access."

Shepard agreed, "I'm on it, but we'll split two and two. I'm leaving Miranda here with you to provide cover. Zaeed! Let's hit it!"

Zaeed bobbed his head with a single quick nod, "Right behind you, Shepard." They hustled down the stairs and zipped through a previously sealed door. Shepard immediately knew the fight was going to get ugly. The passage branched into three passageways, and each had its own blast door they needed to seal. Shepard sprinted toward the first door as Blood Pack started to pour in. Using a biotic charge, she got to the door quickly, and a few well placed shotgun blasts kept the mercs at bay long enough for the door to close. She and Zaeed then moved quickly to the second door. The blast door control was too far up the passage, and Blood Pack were already moving through the area. There were Vorcha, varren and an occasional Krogan, and Shepard and Zaeed had to fight for every foot, moving slowly from cover to cover trying to make progress toward the blast door control panel.

Zaeed called out, "Another wave headed in! Hit that control or we're fucked, Shepard!" Shepard saw no openings, so pulled on her biotics and once again charged up to close the door quickly, only this time leaving herself exposed to the arriving Blood Pack. Her shields dropped under all the fire, and she took some hits.

When the door closed, she motioned Zaeed to the third and last door, grunting as she squatted down and opened her medical pack, "I've got to get some gel on this, then I'm right behind you!"

Zaeed moved pretty good for an older merc and Shepard was happy to have him on the team. Massani brought a lot of experience, but he'd also kept himself in shape, so brought capability as well as his knowledge. He had obviously survived a lot, and someday soon Shepard planned to ask about the scar on his face and his artificial eye; most mercs love telling their battle scar stories and she figured that one had to be a doozie. Medigel applied, she got back on her feet and ran to catch up to her teammate. Zaeed had already made the gate, he was just working on containing the few remaining Blood Pack trying to get through before it closed. As the last Krogan fell, Garrus was on the radio. "Get back here, Shepard. They're coming in the doors."
The Blood Pack leader, Garm, roared in through the doorway, "Raaah! Rip 'em to shreds!" Garrus' sniper rifle barked and a Vorcha standing right next to the big Krogan collapsed. Garm looked up at Garrus then spoke to his troops. "Watch my back. I'll deal with Archangel." Just as Garm and his deputy turned to head up the stairs, Shepard and Zaeed burst in from the lower level. The few Vorcha remaining went down pretty quickly; there were only four, along with one varren, which Garrus took with his second sniper shot. That just left the two big Krogan, which were easily defeated with all three of Shepard's team assisting Garrus. Garm got in close, but Shepard pulled a biotic charge, throwing him back and Miranda slapped him with a warp, dropping his shields. Zaeed took out the second Krogan while the other three teamed up and finished Garm off.

Once Garm went down, the team rallied with Garrus once again. "Thanks, Shepard. They hardly got through to me. And we took out Garm and his Blood Pack. This day just gets better and better."

Shepard felt it was time to go. "All we've got left are the Blue Suns. I say we take our chances and fight our way out."

Garrus nodded in agreement, saying "I think you're right. Tarak's got the toughest group, but nothing we haven't faced before. Besides, he won't be expecting us to meet him head-on..." Garrus was interrupted by the shadow of the gunship appearing outside the window.

Shepard yelled, "Cover!" and dove behind the nearest cabinet. The gunship, however, did not fire. It was merely a decoy while numerous Blue Suns deployed and started pouring into the room. Zaeed was in heaven; he hated the Blue suns and he was killing them left and right, like a man possessed.

Garrus called out that additional troops were entering from the ground floor as well, so Shepard and Zaeed charged down and cleaned them out after a couple of minutes of furious fighting. It always amazed Shepard how during the heat of battle, 120 seconds could seem like an eternity. Once all the mercs were down, they all convened on the upper level once again, trying to figure out where the gunship had gone. They were looking around trying to find it when it suddenly loomed up from down below somewhere. Tarak was at the controls, and as he yelled "Archangel!" over its external speakers, he lit up the forward guns, riddling Garrus with multiple shots. Tarak kept yelling as Garrus crawled out of the line of fire. "You think you can screw with the Blue Suns!" Shepard watched as Garrus sat up behind cover. His armor and shields had deflected a lot of the initial fire, but his shields were now down, and the gunship was still blazing away. Sudden quiet fell as the guns quit, before Tarak broke the temporary calm, yelling, "This ends now!" and launched explosive rockets into the room.

Shepard was running to help her Turian friend when the room in front of her exploded, throwing her onto her back. She rolled and jumped back up, furious, and both she and Miranda warped the gunship. Zaeed popped up from somewhere, holding the trigger down on his assault rifle until the thermal clip overheated, and yelling at the top of his lungs, "Die, you son of a bitch!" The shields on the gunship dropped and Zaeed immediately launched two inferno grenades that exploded on impact, and the team watched the gunship drop out of the sky and explode when it hit the ground. Shepard ran to Garrus, who was laying on the floor, not moving. Shepard crouched down next to her friend, calling his name and gently rolling him towards her so she could check on him. His eyes opened and he grunted in pain.

"We're getting you outta here, Garrus, just hang on!" Shepard looked at Miranda, "Radio Joker! Make sure they're ready for us!"

Miranda made the call and commented, "He's in bad shape. We need to move quickly."
Back on the Normandy, Shepard met Jacob in the briefing room. Jacob told her that they did what they could for Garrus, but he took a bad hit. Doctor Chakwas was familiar with Turian physiology and corrected what she could with surgery, and Miranda had lent her cybernetics expertise. They figured he would have full functionality but didn't know when he would be mission ready. Just as Jacob finished his report, the door to the conference room opened and Garrus walked in. "Shepard."

Jacob laughed as he called Garrus a tough son of a bitch. "Didn't think you'd be up yet. Welcome to the team, Archangel."

Garrus walked into the room and pointed accusingly at Shepard. "Nobody would give me a mirror. How bad is it?"

Shepard put a grin on her face and crossed her arms across her chest. "Hell, Garrus, you were always ugly. Slap some face-paint on there, and no one will even notice."

Garrus laughed, and then grunted in pain, "Ha... ahhh! Don't make me laugh, damn it. My face is barely holding together as it is. Some women find facial scars attractive. Mind you, most of those women are Krogan..." Shepard just laughed and shook her head, staring down at the floor. Jacob saluted the commander and left the room, saying he would leave the two friends to their reunion. As soon as the door closed behind him, Garrus looked at Shepard and spoke in a more serious tone. "Frankly, I'm more worried about you. I've heard bad things about Cerberus these past few years."

Shepard kept looking at the floor as she responded. "I know, Garrus. I was in a coma, haven't been up all that long yet, but the Alliance isn't looking very good either. They broke up the team, the Council is denying everything we found." She sighed, and then pressed on, raising her head to look at Garrus as she finished. "But I hate Cerberus, Garrus, and I don't trust them. Don't worry. I haven't changed. I'm using their assets because I have no alternative, but I'm calling the shots. That's why I need you. I need to know I have someone who will truly have my back when it starts raining shit."

Garrus looked at her like she was crazy. "You realize this plan has me walking through the same shit storm, right? Hah. Just like old times, Shepard. I'm fit for duty whenever you need me. I'll settle in and see what I can do at the forward batteries."

Shepard caught him before he left. "Hey, Garrus? It's great to have you aboard. I'm glad you're here... and by the way... our pilot? It's Joker. Be sure to say hello or you'll hurt his feelings. But before any of that, you're coming with me. I have some business with Aria, and I want you at my side."
Miranda caught up to her as Shepard left the conference room. "Commander, I think it's time to head to the Citadel and get your little Alliance 'errand' out of the way so we can get on with the mission."

Shepard bristled at the operative's derisive tone but let it slide. "Not yet. I have one more thing I need to finish up on Omega before we head out."

Miranda stopped dead in her tracks. "We've picked up all three of our potentials; we've shopped for upgrades, even bought your damned brew pot and coffee to put in it, for a small fortune I might add. What else is there?"

Samantha sighed before answering. "The datapad we picked up?" Receiving a blank stare from Lawson, she was compelled to continue the explanation. "God, Miranda! Stop thinking like TIM and start thinking for yourself! We're going to be operating a lot in the Terminus Systems. Don't you think a little good will from Aria could help us along the way? I'm thinking that informing her of a potential coup should buy us a lot of good will. Friendship and trust is a hell of a lot better way to get things done than terror. Once you figure that out, we might actually be able to work together instead of just along parallel lines."

With Shepard's blatant disrespect of the Illusive Man, Lawson started to prepare an angry retort, but as the commander finished her statement, Miranda snapped her jaw closed, saying nothing. She recognized the fine line the commander had drawn between the concepts of teamwork and just working toward a common goal; she had never thought about it from that aspect before and she gained no small amount of respect for the commander in that realization. "Understood, Commander. I... never thought of it like that. I'll take it under advisement. Let me know when you're ready to go ashore."

The commander smiled, "No need, Miranda. I'm taking Garrus and Mordin with me." That got Miranda's attention; one of the Illusive Man's directives was that at least one Cerberus operative would accompany the commander on all ground missions.

She promptly mentioned it to Shepard, and as she watched anger grow in the commander's eyes, she added, "but what the Illusive Man doesn't know, can't irritate him, right? Right." Lawson said the last word more to herself than to Shepard, as if trying to convince herself this was really a rule she was willing to break.

She gave Shepard a worried smile, to which the commander laughed. "You might be alright after all, Operative Lawson. You're the XO...you can get the ship ready to depart. Hopefully, we won't be long."

Shepard strolled into the lab to get Mordin. Based on previous contact with the Salarian, she was almost afraid to start a conversation; he sure did like to talk. But, Shepard liked to get onto a personal level with all of her crew, and Professor Solus would be no different, so she took a deep breath and asked him if he had time to go ashore with them.

"Of course! Plague on Omega dealt with. Plenty of time to analyze Collector intelligence. Impressive lab. Well equipped. AI particularly helpful. Best setup since worked with Special Tasks Group." His metered speech would take some getting used to, but it had a cadence to it that Sam found somewhat entertaining. They walked and talked at the same time.
"Glad you like the lab. It's a huge step up from what I saw on Omega. That had to be rough."

Mordin flashed a quick smile. "No! Loved it. Limited facility presented a challenge. Save greatest number of people using limited resources. Add in security threats, gangs, merc groups. Additional difficulties stretched abilities to limit. Very rewarding. Quite enjoyable! Also enjoy saving people of course. Helping the helpless, greater good and all that. Nice retirement after STG work."

Mordin's dossier was very vague about what he did in the STG, and Shepard was definitely curious. Since he mentioned it, it seemed the perfect time to ask about his experiences. "Speaking of the STG...Everyone I talked to on Omega said you were crazy, saving people with one hand, while gunning down mercs and gangs with the other. Sounds like you have some practical experience."

Mordin gave her a quick and dirty on STG operations, ending with a statement that the STG was the basic model for the Council Spectres, with the same type of independent operation capabilities. He then answered her question, with generic mission descriptors and few details.

"Several recon missions. Covert, high-risk. Served under young captain named Kirrahe. Studied Krogan Genophage. Took water, tissue samples from Krogan colonies."

Shepard recognized the young captain's name and cut in. "Kirrahe? We worked with him on Virmire. His team helped me destroy Saren's Krogan cloning facility there."

Mordin was very complimentary of the young captain. "Heard he was part of that! Jury-rigged explosive? Always got job done with limited resources. Good captain! Bit of a cloaca, though. Loved his speeches. 'Hold the line!' Personally prefer to get the job done and go home. Probably military bravado. Jargon, chest-pounding." Mordin hesitated and raised his hands in apology, glancing back and forth between Shepard and Garrus. "Uhhh...No offense."

Shepard laughed. "None taken. You know, I brought you along for more than conversation, though. I have a special task for you when we get back on board. My cabin... hell, probably the whole ship... is bugged. I'd like every one of them that is in what you would consider 'personal space' to be removed. Can you do it?"

Mordin replied promptly. "Of course. Already removed five from the lab. Destroyed all but one. Very expensive. Returned that one to Operative Lawson. Seemed angry. Should be happy I didn't destroy them all." Shepard was about to make some witty comment, then got quiet when she realized how much pain Mordin's assessment was causing Garrus; it still hurt the Turian to laugh and she didn't want to make things any worse.

As they approached the steps to Aria's command center, one of her Turian guards mentioned that Aria had work for them if they were interested. Keeping in mind that her whole purpose behind this visit was to ingratiate her team to the Pirate Queen, Shepard stopped and heard him out. The guard started talking. "Aria's gotten word that some Blood Pack mercs plan to kill an old acquaintance of hers. A Krogan named Patriarch. She'd like you to keep that from happening."

Shepard was curious. "Why come to me? Aria has plenty of muscle for a job like that."

"Because Aria said so." It was obvious the guard was not used to people questioning Aria's requests as he continued, "What other reason do you need?"

Shepard pressed for an answer, trying to learn more about Aria in the process. "People like Aria don't do things without a damn good reason. I want to hear it."
The merc continued, "Fine, as long as the job gets done... but I didn't tell you this. Got me? If it gets out that Aria's protecting the Patriarch...well, that makes her look vulnerable, and some people might try to exploit that. You're not on her payroll, so if you do it, seems like just a random act of kindness by the mighty Commander Shepard."

Made sense, but Shepard wanted more. "Why does Aria care?"

"Patriarch was one of her deadliest enemies back in the day. Now she keeps him around as a trophy. As long as he lives he serves as an example of what happens if you cross her."

"Ok, so that's Aria's side... but why does the Blood Pack care?" Now Garrus was curious, because he was still happy to cause the Omega mercs more problems, any way he could.

The guard laughed, "If you knew Patriarch, you'd know the answer to that question. He can't keep his mouth shut, and some people don't like the stories he's willing to share. He can cause people problems. He knows too much."

Shepard glanced at Garrus, then back to the guard. "Consider it done. Where do I find him?"

The guard nodded and gave the group directions on how to find the Patriarch, telling them to come back for payment once the job was done.

Shepard continued up the stairs to speak to Aria about the datapad. The commander was surprised; she was not confronted by any of the guards and Aria just waived at her to take a seat. Glancing at Shepard's companions, Aria commented on the obvious success of her hunts and that she appreciated people who knew how to get things done. Shepard pressed the opening, "So, you appreciate my abilities. Sounds like a possible basis for... let's say... potential future mutually beneficial arrangements."

Aria forced a laugh as she stood up and approached the commander, with a slow, sensual sway in her hips. She ran her fingers lightly down Shepard's cheek and across her chin. "Why, Commander. Knowing your... predilection for Asari, I might think you are propositioning me."

Shepard laughed in return, enjoying the flirting to a limited extent. "Only for business, Aria. My personal arrangements are quite... satisfactory... to me."

"Yes, I imagine so. I've had the privilege of meeting your Dr T'Soni. She surprised me. Your little shy archeologist has some fire when she's... sufficiently motivated." Aria suddenly went cold, not appreciating being dismissed so readily. She suddenly slapped the commander on the cheek, not hard, but enough to sting, and retreated to her seat before continuing. "But business, that's different. I have many friends and enemies kept at varying distances. I don't count you among either, yet. We'll see how useful you prove."

Shepard glared at the Asari, but did not move to rub her cheek or make any other move to acknowledge Aria's act. She tossed the datapad at Aria, saying, "Maybe this will prove my usefulness. Got it off the mercs gunning for Archangel. They were coming for you next."

Aria caught the pad gracefully and glanced through it. The more she read, the narrower her eyes got, until they were angry slits. "Interesting. Would someone like to tell me how this information slipped the net?" She threw the pad at one of her guards, all of whom were suddenly very nervous.

The one she hit stuttered out a reply, "I... I'll look into it!"

Aria's expression turned contemplative. "Looks like I'll have to do a little cleaning in my organization. Thanks for the heads-up, Shepard. I'll... consider... your proposition."
"It's all I can ask, Aria. I am curious though. How did you happen to meet Dr T'Soni?" Shepard didn't remember Liara ever mentioning such a meeting, so was honestly curious.

"Oh, it was over a little business with the Blue Suns. Ask your Turian friend, he was there, at least for part of it." Aria had an expression on her face that glowed with mischievous intent, so Shepard let it drop; no longer feeling like it was something she wanted to pursue. At least not with Aria.

With that, Shepard stood up. "Thanks for your time, Aria. Been a pleasure, but you know how it is. Places to go, people to see. Maybe I'll see you around."

Aria instantly distanced herself. "Whatever, Shepard. Maybe I'll be here."

The team worked their way down to the lower level and found a room with an aging Krogan. When they walked in, he was talking about planning a funeral. When Shepard got closer, he stopped his story and turned to her. "I don't think I know you, Human. I'm the Patriarch. Aria's Patriarch. What do you want?" Still looking to improve the team's operations in the Terminus, Shepard asked him about Aria. The Patriarch told her about a young Asari who showed up with nothing but the clothes on her back; he thought she was another dancer. "Huh! Then she killed half my men and convinced the rest that she could run this place better than I did. She came for me here in this very bar and we tore the place apart. She crushed one of my hearts and shattered half the bones in my body. Then she let me live, convinced me I could play the role of an advisor. What she really did was turn me into a damn trophy. I killed a lot of people, lived well, and was beaten by a small Asari who keeps me around as an example."

Shepard was content with the knowledge that Aria hadn't wanted to give up, so moved on to the job at hand and told the Patriarch that someone wanted him dead. The Patriarch scoffed at the idea, saying they didn't want him dead, they wanted to use his death to get to Aria. "So, she send you? Would look bad if I was hurt while under her protection. Maybe I'll just stay, see who thinks I'm important enough to kill, and get some last revenge on Aria on my way to the next life."

Shepard liked this old Krogan; he had spirit, so she offered him a better option. "You know that wouldn't work. Aria would just spin it as she'd gotten tired of you, that you were no longer of any use or entertainment value so the assassins did her a favor and rid her of a pest. How about we not give her the satisfaction? I'll handle the assassins for you, as the powerful warlord with forces at his command. Not just Aria's trophy."

The Patriarch stood a little taller, but still eyed Shepard with suspicion. "And why would you do this for me?"

Shepard shrugged. "I respect Aria for who and what she is, but I don't like how she gives a little and takes a lot. If I am going to deal with her in the future, I want to even the score a little."

The Patriarch laughed, "So, you would do this for me just to get under Aria's skin, to maintain more parity than she likes? You play a dangerous game and the risk is yours to take, Human, but I like you. You will be my krantt, and fight for my honor. You do this for me, and I might even feel like a Krogan again!"

The team headed out to the main hall to exit Afterlife, and came face-to-face with two Blood Pack Krogans. The lead merc waved his gun in Shepard's face, saying, "Out of our way, Human." While Shepard asked if they were there for Patriarch, Garrus and Mordin both moved a bit out to their respective sides, flanking the mercs. The Blood Pack thug didn't budge, just asked, "What if we are? You gonna do something about it?"
Shepard was casual in her response, eyeing the merc as she stated that she was Patriarch's krantt, and would do whatever it took. The merc laughed at her, saying he wasn't even aware the old man had one. Shepard shook her head, then drew her weapon as she said, "You should have done your homework." The team was more than ready for two ill-prepared Krogan; there wasn't even really a fight before the two mercs lie dead on the floor. Shepard looked at Mordin and Garrus and just shrugged her shoulders. She said, "Well. That was easy," as she turned to walk back into the club and let Patriarch know it was already over.

After thanking the commander, he offered her a word of advice. "Be careful with Aria. She will approve of what you've done, I think, but not of you altering the balance of Omega. I think it reminds her too much of herself."

Shepard thanked the Patriarch for his advice, and went to see Grizz for payment. It didn't turn out to be so easy. Having killed the mercenaries in the main hall, it caught Aria's attention and she wanted to see the Spectre. Shepard sighed, and headed up the stairs to the Queen's lair. She hadn't even walked all the way in before Aria started speaking. "Word has it that Patriarch's krantt took out the men sent here to kill him. Funny, I didn't know he had a krantt."

Shepard took the chance to be a smart ass, thinking to test just how far Aria would push their budding association. "Hmm. You didn't know about the coup either. Your information net appears to need some work." She was pleased with the result when Aria didn't take the bait.

Aria simply responded, "Hmm... well, no one would dare cross him with such a powerful krantt standing up for him." But, the Asari also let the commander know she was aware of the ploy as she continued. "It's not what I asked, but you got the job done. You've done a lot for me Shepard, and you're after the Collectors which benefits me as well. Let me return the favor by granting you your request for a mutually beneficial relationship. You don't fuck with any of my operations, and none of my forces will harass the Normandy within the Terminus."

Shepard nodded in agreement. "How do I know what operations are yours?" Aria laughed, "Oh, you'll know. Everything I run has the Omega symbol on it, just like the Alliance, just like Cerberus. I label what's mine, and my only rule is don't fuck with Aria. You obey that, we're good."

Shepard stood up and looked directly at Aria as she spoke, "Simple. I like it. Easy to remember." With a final nod, Shepard turned and left the control center, her team in tow.

After they made it out the last door and were walking back through the docks to the Normandy, Shepard queried Garrus. "So, you want to tell me what that was all about back there with Aria? How you and Liara ended up on Omega together and you didn't think it was important enough to mention?"

Garrus shook his head. "Ya know that job I mentioned, the one I said went south? That was it, but I can't tell you anything more. I know you don't like it, but that's a discussion you need to have with Liara, not me. I'm not stepping into the middle of it."

Shepard was not pleased and she stopped in her tracks. "You're already in the middle of it, Garrus! Just the fact I know you were here with her. What the hell could have possibly brought you and Liara to Omega?"

"It was her decision to come, Shepard. I made some bad calls, and everything that happened as a result... I don't trust my judgment in this. You have to ask her to tell you. I'm sorry."
Garrus looked like he wanted to throw up, so Shepard grudgingly let it slide. "Alright, Vakarian. But don't think this is over." Shepard turned and headed for the ship, very concerned that perhaps TIM's story about Liara working for the Shadow Broker was true and Garrus flat out refused to be the one to break the bad news. *Son of a bitch! I have got to find a way to get in touch with her!*

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Aethyta was at the bar when two Asari came in, and not just any two Asari. She immediately recognized Liara's pilot, Judea; she was a regular. Aethyta, however, did not recognize the commando she was with, and wondered if it was her contact from Armali. As they approached the bar, Aethyta called out a welcome. "Hey, Judea! How's life in the fast frigate biz?"

Judea laughed. "Boring! I thought I was going to get that run to Thessia to pick up some cargo, but it got shipped on a shuttle instead, and dragged this sorry-ass commando along with it. Matriarch, meet Arla. Arla... Matriarch Aethyta."

Aethyta whistled. "Hmmm. Must be good stuff to send a courier along with it."

Arla smiled. "Nah, just some personal belongings Lady T'Soni requested. I came along for the shopping. Looking for some special amp upgrades that have supposedly been released, along with some other stuff. The Matriarch gave me a whole list!"

Judea jumped into the conversation. "That's just crazy. She could have just sent the list to me. I have plenty of time to do stuff like that, rather than send you across the galaxy just to go shopping. That doesn't make a lot of sense."

Aethyta barked out a laugh, "Oh! A maiden after my own heart, questioning the Matriarchs and their supposed wisdom! Careful young one, that can get you into trouble, trust me! I've been there!"

Judea's face paled and she stammered, "Oh! N-no! That's not... that's not what I meant at all! I just..." Judea tapered off, not having any real argument, because it really was exactly what she meant. She just hadn't meant to be so obvious in trying to find out why Arla was really on Illium, so she changed the subject, asking Arla about how everything was going, back in Armali. They talked a long time about training programs and new weapons and armor, and finally Judea yawned. After Arla promised she'd be fine on her own, Judea retired for the night, leaving Arla and the Matriarch alone at the bar.

"Goddess! I didn't think she'd ever give up! She's not very subtle. She's been trying since I got here to find out why I came. From what I've seen, I'm starting to wonder that myself!" Arla was not pleased with her lack of progress on the T'Soni front. She explained to the Matriarch about being completely cut off from Liara, when she had fully expected to be bunked with Riana as a matter of house courtesy. When the Matriarch questioned that, Arla came to Liara's defense. "Don't get me wrong, Matriarch. House courtesy is being met; they just have me bunking on the ship instead of in the apartment. Lady T'Soni is well aware of her obligations, and is deficient in none of them. She just has other company to entertain that we were unaware of."

Aethyta was very surprised by the news. "Do you not realize who that is? That's Commander Shepard's mother! I wonder who contacted who... Goddess, I wish you could have gotten in there; we need to know what they are talking about. Damn. Your visit has actually raised more questions than it's answered." She then turned the conversation to Liara somehow getting tipped off, scanning her whole office, and destroying every bug Aethyta had in place. "So, we're deaf, dumb and blind, and not much smarter than we were when all this shit started happening. Tevos is going to hate me. Good thing I'm on the fringe of Council space."
Up in the apartment, Liara, Hannah, and Riana had enjoyed a quiet dinner, even though Hannah had announced she was departing early. After digesting the news that Samantha was alive, Hannah arranged to take the early morning shuttle and was now on the Citadel to talk to Councilor Anderson. She was still extremely angry over the whole aborted rescue attempt of her daughter, and what she saw as an Alliance cover-up to avoid political fall-out. An Alliance officer had conspired against a Council Spectre, while on a Council mission, and it was all swept under the rug, along with her daughter. Who, in typical Commander Shepard fashion, managed to somehow come out of a hopeless situation very much alive... again. The Alliance had some explaining to do. Liara urged her to be cautious, until they had a chance to talk to Samantha and find out more of what was going on, but Hannah trusted David. She had agreed to hold off on her talk to Hackett, but she wouldn't guarantee how long. As she continued to reminisce over her short time spent with Liara, she found it easy to identify the fire Liara still held in her heart for Samantha. Her daughter was lucky, and she prayed they would find their way past the obstacles life kept throwing in their path.

A door opened and she saw Councilor Anderson standing before her, beckoning her into his office. The minute the door was closed, Captain Shepard opened up and fired with both barrels, running the entire list of facts that Liara had provided her, barely taking time to breathe. When she finished, she looked at David and simply asked, "Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Anderson sighed and looked her straight in the face as he answered. "You've got most of it, Hannah. And I am well aware of Samantha's survival. What you don't know are all the rumors that I'm fighting, saying she has abandoned the Alliance and gone rogue, just like Saren." He held up his hand to stop Hannah when she started to contradict him. "Don't get angry with me. I'm just telling you what I'm fighting against. She's been seen on a Cerberus flagged ship, wearing Cerberus colors and to be honest, we have nothing to contradict them. We don't have the facts, but I'm working on getting them. Have you talked to Samantha at all?" When Hannah shook her head no, he continued, "So you being here, today, is just coincidence?"

Hannah looked at him questioningly, "Coincidence with what, David? I just came from Illium after meeting with Liara, and she showed me video footage of Sam on Omega...2 days ago."

"You've talked with Liara? God, I wish that girl would talk to me! She won't return my calls."

Hannah growled, "Do you blame her? The Alliance abandoned her bondmate, and then ignored her pleas to continue the search. And for what, David? She was right! She has every reason to be furious with you and hate the Alliance for what they did... as do I! But like me, she's also loyal, maybe to a fault. Just keep in mind where her loyalty lies, and it's with Samantha. Not the Alliance, not with Thessia. With one each, Commander Shepard. And you didn't answer my question... coincidence with what? What else is happening today that I don't know about?"

Anderson stood up and walked to his window. "God forgive me, Hannah, for not telling you this before, but right now, this very instant, the Normandy SR-2 is docking on the Citadel and thirty minutes from now, your daughter is going to be standing in this office, so I hope you don't have a shuttle to catch because you're going to miss it."

Hannah shot up out of her chair like a rocket. "David Anderson! How could you keep from me that my daughter was not only alive, but that she was coming to Council space to see you! Oh, God... Liara is going to be so much more angry at you! You had better at least arrange for a video call to Illium, David, or she'll flay you alive!"

The councilor stood at the window with his head hung low. "We need to talk to her first, Hannah. No one from the Alliance has. For all we know, she could have switched sides. God knows she has
every reason to hate both the Alliance and the Council right now.” He turned and faced Hannah, and she could see the stricken look on his face. He thought of Samantha like a daughter.

It tore Hannah's heart apart to see the expression on his face. "Oh, David. I'm so sorry. This does put us all in a spot, doesn't it? But it's Sam! We both know better!"

Anderson nodded. "Yes, we do. I've always trusted her, Hannah. Hell, I helped her steal the Normandy. But we have to convince everyone else of it too."

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Returning to the Citadel was interesting to say the least. Shepard got out of the taxi and approached the main doors to the wards; evidence of increased security since the attack was everywhere. Before she got there, a large advertising column attracted her attention by calling her name. She had thought the contact protocols she received for Kasumi Goto a little odd, but apparently they were on the mark. She approached the column and an image appeared, followed by a request. "Commander Shepard. Enter the password and receive a free gift!" When Shepard did not respond immediately, the voice spoke again, "Got problems with collectors? Try Kasumi's credit services!"

The commander chuckled, and spoke the provided passphrase, "Silence is golden." Kasumi was obviously of oriental descent, but wearing a hooded cloak that obscured a large portion of her face.

All Shepard could really see was that she had a wide purple stripe tattooed on her lower lip, and those lips were accompanied by a soft lilting voice. "Good to finally meet you, Commander. Kasumi Goto. I'm a fan."

Shepard had her appointment with Anderson, so got straight to the point. "Have you been briefed on the mission?"

Kasumi had a soft, pleasant laugh as she spoke, "Honestly, I'm shocked they didn't come to me sooner. My fault for being hard to find, I guess."

"So, what's the point of all the cloak and dagger if it makes it hard to get jobs?"

Kasumi became very serious and her voice dropped in volume as she replied. "Because I'm the best thief in the business, not the most famous. I need to watch my step to make sure it stays that way. I also needed to make sure this was all legit. It's obvious you're the real deal."

Shepard crossed her arms and tilted her head as she asked, "How can you be so sure just by looking at me?"

"There's a certain... aura about you, Commander. Like you've seen things no one else has. It's time to wrap this up." Kasumi's image faded from the column and Shepard looked up, in the direction she now heard the voice coming from. She saw a lithe Asian standing on the catwalk above her, who continued speaking. "I'm not very comfortable talking so much, out in the open like this. See you on the ship, Shepard." As Shepard watched, Kasumi Goto activated a cloaking device and disappeared from sight.

Shepard turned and approached the entrance to the Citadel, stopping at the security checkpoint to be scanned for entry. The guard looked very confused by the readout and was speaking with someone inside. "What? Do you seriously think... yeah, okay." He then looked at Shepard, "Sorry for the inconvenience, ma'am. The system seems to think you're, ah, dead."

Shepard rubbed the back of her neck and said, "Yeah, I'm not surprised. I was listed as missing in action a couple years ago, and this is my first trip back here."
The guard gestured at the door. "Go ahead in and check with my Captain. He can reinstate you in our system."

As she walked into the security office, the Captain looked up at her with a grin. "I see the problem already, Commander Shepard. My console says you're dead."

Shepard asked him what she needed to do to fix it, and he gave her a couple of options. He could give her a temporary pass, and she could run around for three days to all the offices she needed to visit to get everything reapproved..." or I can just push this little override button right here and make everything like it used to be." Captain Bailey looked up at her for approval.

Shepard frowned. "You can do that? How many regulations does that break?"

Bailey grumped, "I don't care. You're a goddamn hero! It's not like we have to worry about you smuggling guns in or something. There. All done. Might want to visit the Council, though. Figure they might like to confirm their lost Spectre isn't dead."

Shepard grimaced. "Yeah, that's on my agenda. Not my favorite place to visit, but it's been awhile since I've checked in. Thanks, Bailey. I owe ya one."

Bailey scoffed. "We all owe you more than one, Shepard. You need anything, you just let me know. We're all in your debt!"

Shepard thanked him again and turned to her crewmates. It was time to get busy; each had their assignments, the normal upgrade quests and talking to contacts on the station for any additional information they could gather. Shepard would much rather be shopping for new toys, but grudgingly headed to the Council offices to meet Anderson and the rest of the Council.

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When Commander Shepard stepped into the councilor's office, her heart skipped a beat and she found it hard to get enough breath to form words. "Mom?" That was all it took, and Hannah Shepard was across the room, crushing her daughter in a hug. There were no words to describe the feeling of joy the two felt being together again. Amidst her tears, the elder Shepard told Sam she knew she had a meeting with the council, but she wouldn't be going anywhere. She would wait outside until the meeting was concluded, and then they would talk. When Anderson walked up and told them it was time, Samantha was reluctant to let her mother go, but finally did with a shaky laugh, "Duty first!... Mom... don't go far." The sense of loss was evident on Sam's face, and Hannah already regretted agreeing to step away for the meeting.

Samantha turned to Anderson and shook his hand. "Good to see you, Anderson. Hope the last couple of years have treated you well enough."

Anderson looked her over as he answered, "There've been some rough spots, but I'm not going to complain, knowing what you've been through. Damn good to see you too, Shepard. Let's get this formality over with so we can talk."

Anderson turned to the communications terminal and called up the Council. The first person to speak was the Salarian, Councilor Valern. "We've heard many rumors surrounding your unexpected return. Some of them are unsettling."

Asari Councilor Tevos jumped in, showing her typical support, "We called this meeting so you could explain your actions, Shepard. We owe you that much." Tevos then looked at the other councilors as she finished, as if they needed reminding. "After all, you saved our lives in the battle against Saren
and his Geth.”

Shepard shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, I've heard many versions of how you all are ignoring Sovereign and the Reapers, but I'm not here to debate that today; it's a useless argument anyway, I know. Today I'm just here to tell you what the hell happened to me and where I've been for the last two years." Shepard went through her story as best she could, highlighting her plan to use the Normandy, and Cerberus assets to complete the mission against the Collectors. "I have every intention of sending reports back to the Alliance at every opportunity, and to feed information to the council via Councilor Anderson. You should be happy...I'm working on a Council mission and it's not costing you a penny."

Turian Councilor Sparatus didn't believe her account, saying it was too vague and incomplete. He was not pleased. "You are working for Cerberus, an avowed enemy of the Council. This is treason, a capital offense." Anderson jumped in, "That's too far! Shepard is a hero. I'm on this Council too, and I won't let that line of thought continue!"

Angry, Shepard ridiculed Sparatus. "Councilor Sparatus, you've hated me from day one, and you've never believed a word I've said. But I'll say it again, a bit louder, just in case it's because you're hard of hearing, and not stupid. I am not working for Cerberus. I am using their stuff and taking their money, and then when the mission is complete, I'm coming home to the Alliance and maybe you all will have your heads pulled out of your asses by then and breathing enough fresh air that you can actually think before you speak."

Sparatus just sputtered in amazement, and Tevos stepped in again, before the situation went from bad to worse. "Perhaps there is a compromise. Not a public acknowledgement, given your current... affiliations, but something to show peripheral support."

Valern kept it going. "Yes! Keep a low profile, and restrict your operations to the Terminus Systems, the Council can let you continue operations and reinstate you as a Spectre."

At this point, Sparatus was very vocal in his dissent, but it didn't matter. The vote was three against one in favor of restoring Shepard's Spectre status, so Sparatus could do nothing but fume at the outcome. Shepard accepted the conditions and the offer of reinstatement. "I appreciate the trust some of you are still willing to show me. I won't let you down."

Tevos followed up, "Good luck with your investigation, Shepard. We hope for a quick resolution...and a quick end to your relationship with Cerberus."

Anderson was surprised, "Well, that went better than expected. The council won't do anything to help, but at least they won't get in the way either."

Shepard was still ticked off at Sparatus. "That shit Turian won't be happy until he has my head mounted on his damn wall. Keep him off my back, Anderson, or you will be trying me for treason because I'm going to shoot him myself and bury him with Saren."

Anderson gave her a sidelong glance, "Shepard...."

"I know, Sir. He just gets under my skin. He's such an ass... but enough about the council. What about my crew? I've tracked down most, at least to find out what they're doing but there's some I can't find... like Ashley Williams."

Lieutenant Williams is on a special duty assignment. It's classified. Sorry, Shepard, but as long as you're working with a Cerberus crew I can't pass that information to you. I'm afraid as far as that goes, I'll be as bad as the rest of the Council. The information flow will be largely one direction. I'm
Shepard laughed. "No worries, Anderson. That sounds very much like the speech I gave to Garrus when I brought him on board. We'll be careful, and I'll pass as much as I can to you. I'm... I'm going to go talk to my mom. Thanks for everything, Anderson."

Shepard went back out to the lobby, and she and Hannah had a long talk. Finally, Hannah said they had to go, because she had a surprise for Sam. They walked down a long hallway, to a part of the embassy where Sam had never been, into a small room. Sam looked around, didn't understand where they were, and looked questioningly at her mom. Hannah went over to a terminal and started typing in some codes, then turned and faced Sam. "It's the secure Commander's communications network. You have twenty minutes, Sam. It's the best I could do, and I'll be waiting outside for you."

Samantha still didn't understand and was looking at her mom to explain when she heard a voice behind her that she once feared she would never hear again. Her eyes went wide and she spun around; Hannah Shepard slipped out the door and locked it behind her, to give her daughter privacy.

Samantha was shaking like a leaf as she dared breathe the name aloud, "Liara!"
Twenty minutes. Twenty minutes of dedicated time on the Commander's communications network. Sam had a pretty good idea at how many strings her mom had to pull and how many favors she needed to call in to get twenty minutes of personal time on the command network. Sam couldn't stand up, and collapsed into the chair in front of the terminal, just staring at the screen. Liara was crying gently, but still managed words. "Shepard? Are you alright? Goddess, that sounds so banal! You're alive! My sources said you were, but I never believed...and then I saw the video of you on Omega..."

Sam had finally found her voice, "God, Blue! I'm so sorry to put you through that! I can't imagine what the last two years have been like for you. It's so good to see you! I've missed you terribly and I've been desperate to find a way to talk to you! I wish I could touch you and make sure you're real!" Sam jumped out of the chair and approached the screen. Liara laughed, and Sam's heart melted at the sound. "Oh how I miss that laugh. God, I miss everything about you! I wanted to write you, but..." Sam hesitated, unsure of how to explain, "Liara, I'm on a Cerberus ship, but I figure you probably know that. My mom told me about the video. I don't trust them, Liara, but I'm stuck with them for now... but I also have Garrus with me again. He joined us on Omega, so I've got someone I trust to watch my back."

Shepard didn't see the shadow that passed quickly across Liara's face. The Asari held mixed emotions about Garrus, but dared not say anything. She was still incredibly angry with the Turian over the perceived abandonment of her on Omega, but couldn't risk Shepard getting into an argument with him over it, based on Sha'ira's gift of words indicating his importance to Shepard's future safety. Instead, she swallowed her personal feelings, and spoke positively. "That's wonderful, Shepard! I know you felt as if he were a brother to you. I am glad you are not alone there!"

That prompted a quick discussion about Joker and Karin being on board as well, before Shepard fell solemn. "I'm sorry I haven't been in touch, but I don't trust Cerberus with the knowledge of how important you are to me, so I'm afraid to communicate with you from the ship and they're with me every second when I step off. But I'm working on it! I have this crazy Salarian working for me, Mordin Solus. He's ex-STG and he's going to de-bug my quarters. I'll have to see if he can figure out a way to bypass the ship's comm filter. Maybe not video, but at least get me secure messaging! I... I'm rambling is what I'm doing. I just have so much to tell you!"

Liara smiled the whole time, just absorbing her bondmate's voice and loving to watch her so animated... so alive! "And I have much to tell you as well, Shepard. But it needs to be done in person. Please tell me you can get to Illium?"

Liara could hear the longing in Liara's voice, which made her answer all that much harder. "I can, Blue, but I don't know when. I have a list of folks I need to recruit for the mission, and if I wait too long, they may relocate and I'll lose them. I have a crazy biotic that I need to pull from a maximum security prison called Purgatory, and a Krogan Warlord from Korlus. I wanted to get Wrex, but we can't seem to get him to leave Tuchanka. I want you, too! I want you by my side again, love, more than anybody! I need my biotic dynamo, and you know there's no one I trust more!" Sam trailed off as she watched Liara's expression become shielded and withdrawn at her request to join the team. "Liara? I can see it on your face. You won't... why won't you come with me?" Tears started to form in Sam's eyes at the realization.

Liara started to cry as well, but choked the words out. "I'm an information broker now, Shepard. It's paid the bills since you... well, for the past two years. I have contracts, obligations. You were gone..."
I... I needed to survive, to do something, and now I have commitments here. Things I need to take care of."

*Information broker? No! I won't believe it!* Sam's voice cracked, "What kinds of things? What are you doing? Are you in trouble? Danger?"

Liara was quick to reassure her, "No, no trouble, no danger. But it's been a long two years, Shepard. I had things to do while you were gone. I have debts to repay."

Sam was confused. "Debts? Certainly not financial... Liara, did something happen to the estate or something? What's going on? Please, tell me!"

Liara hung her head, "I can't, Shepard. Not over this comm net, anyway. I need to see you in person... to explain. This isn't something I can do now. Not like this. Please, just get to Illium as soon as you can. I'll be waiting."

*What could she possibly not tell me over the Alliance Secure Net?* Sam walked closer to the comm screen. "I'm coming, Blue. I'm going to work my way through the recruitment list and I'm going to come for you. Count on it. Figure out whatever it is you need to do, because I really expect you to come with me. You're my bondmate, T'Soni. I need you with me. I want you with me! Goddess, I miss you so badly, every day. I love you!" Samantha put her hand up to the screen, but instead of reciprocating, Liara dropped her head and covered her face with her hands, sobbing.

A mechanical voice cut in, announcing one minute remaining, and Samantha cried out, "What? No! Goddess, Blue! Talk to me!"

Liara lifted her head and placed her hand on the screen in response. "I'll be waiting, Shepard. Come and we'll talk. It's all I can promise right now. Please understand. You've been gone for two years."

Samantha had just put her hand up against where Liara's hand was on the screen when time ran out and the screen went black. With bullets flying, 120 seconds seemed like an eternity; in love, twenty minutes passed in a flash. Sam stared at the blank screen that just seconds before had contained the essence of her love. Her heart screamed at her to take the Normandy straight to Illium, but her sense of duty told her no; she couldn't risk losing track of their potential recruits. Also, she couldn't tip her hand and show Cerberus how important Liara was too her. She wouldn't give them that leverage. It suddenly dawned on her that not once did Liara say the words 'I love you.' Sam creased her brow and pursed her lips in contemplation, but found no justifications. She stepped out in the hall in search of her mother.

"Mom, what the hell is going on with Liara? What didn't you tell me?" The pain in Sam's voice was evident, but Hannah didn't understand what had happened, her daughter should have been ecstatic.

As Sam explained about her conversation with Liara, realization dawned on Hannah's face. "Oh Sam, stop worrying! I just saw her in person and there is no doubt in my mind that girl loves you like there's no tomorrow. You just have to realize she's scared to death! To you, it was like yesterday. But to her? She lost you, she grieved for you for two years, not knowing where you were, what had happened to you. When you disappeared, she lost a piece of her soul. She just needs time to adjust and accept you're not a dream, sweetie." Hannah reached out and poked Sam in the chest as she said, "She needs *You.*"

Hannah then told her daughter of all the things Liara had done to hunt down the evidence against Captain Mikhailovich, and the effort and personal money she spent on the search for Sam. Samantha was like a petulant child, "But why couldn't she say it, Mom? Why didn't she say she loved me? Why did she cry, instead?"
Hannah shook her head. "I don't know, hon. You'll just have to get your ass to Illium and ask her
yourself."

Commander Shepard was pleased. The upgrades were coming along nicely and the ship that was
already cutting edge continued to get better every day. Cerberus had collected some of the best
technicians the galaxy had to offer and it showed. They had some armor upgrades to accomplish that
couldn't be done in space, so Shepard was forcing the issue that they be done at Illium. That would
give her three days to talk to Liara. And while Commander Shepard was doing well, Samantha
Shepard was not. Since the video call with her bondmate, her emotions had been in turmoil and her
nightmares returned with a vengeance. She was surviving on energy bars and coffee and she had to
concentrate way too hard on keeping her temper in check. It didn't help that they had stopped in at
Alchera and visited the crash site; she suffered flashbacks while on the planet and it brought
everything back to the forefront in her mind. Shepard had recovered the required 'evidence' of the
twenty missing Alliance crew and collected the dog tags off them all. She dropped a message to
Councilor Anderson relaying the information, and promised to dropship everything at her earliest
convenience, probably when they hit Illium. Garrus had been particularly quiet, and when pressed on
the issue finally admitted to having been there with Liara right after the crash. It was difficult for Sam
to hear, but it gave her a lot more insight into the distress her bondmate was suffering with her
sudden reappearance. It provided another piece to the puzzle, but Garrus was still completely
unforthcoming on what happened between him and Liara on Omega. His lack of cooperation was
frustrating to say the least, and did nothing to reduce the irritated edge on Shepard's temper or allay
her fears about the Shadow Broker.

When they got to Purgatory, Shepard took Miranda and Mordin to the prisoner pick-up. She briefly
contemplated bringing Zaeed, but felt his history with the Blue Suns could cause unnecessary
tension, since that's who ran the prison. Just the fact that Cerberus was 'buying' a prisoner rubbed
Shepard the wrong way. It was rumored that many of the prisoners were sold to Batarian slavers if
the prisoner's home world stopped paying for their upkeep. The situation already had explosive
potential if Shepard saw any evidence of such sales, adding Zaeed to the mix just seemed an
unnecessary risk. As the team boarded the ship, they were greeted by guards who stated Jack was
being readied, and they'd be able to pick her up shortly. Shepard had flashbacks to Noveria as the
guard continued. "As this is a high-security vessel, you'll need to relinquish your weapons before we
proceed."

Shepard scoffed. "You don't want to know what happened to the last person who demanded this
Council Spectre relinquish her weapon. Just know that it's not gonna happen." The guards reacted to
the statement by drawing their weapons, which made the Normandy crew do the same.

The stand-off was brought quickly to a close when the Warden walked in and told everyone to stand
down, introducing himself as Warden Kuril. The stand-off was over, but tensions definitely stepped
up a notch, as the Warden continued speaking. "Your weapons will be returned on the way out. You
must realize this is standard procedure."

Shepard glared at the Warden. "And what part of Spectre standard procedure of 'I don't give up my
weapon to anyone' don't you get?"

The Warden looked the commander over very critically, and Shepard knew he was trying to gauge
her resolve. It didn't take him long to figure out she was not bluffing in the slightest. He acquiesced,
telling his guards to let them proceed. "Our facility is more than secure enough to handle three armed
guests." Kuril then explained the process of bringing Jack out of cryogenic storage and that he would
take them to Outprocessing where they could wait until the funds transfer was verified complete.
As they followed Kuril, he gave them a brief tour as they walked. He was very proud of their level of security and their capabilities to isolate individual inmates, especially troublemakers. He bragged about how many prisoners they handled and how quickly they could respond to problems, and how every once in a while they are forced to blow one such 'problem' out an airlock as an example to the rest of the population.

When Shepard asked specifically about Jack, Kuril made a tsking noise and flared his mandibles. "Cerberus hasn't told you? Jack is the meanest handful of violence and hate I've ever encountered. Dangerous, crazy, and very powerful. You'll see soon enough."

Miranda looked around and asked, "Have you ever had any escape attempts?"

Kuril laughed. "Nothing ever goes wrong here. We're in space...they have nowhere to go, and they know it. But still, we exercise extreme caution. These individuals are dangerous and we don't want anyone getting hurt. We have many ways to control the population." As he spoke those words, an altercation took place out on the floor. The team watched as a pylon extended upward and launched two control bubbles, independently surrounding and isolating each of the combatants.

Mordin watched, hands on his hips. "Impressive technology. Very useful application."

They came to a junction, and Warden Kuril said, "I'm going to confirm the funds from Cerberus have cleared. Outprocessing is straight down this hallway. Just keep going past the interrogation rooms and the supermax wing. I'll catch up with you later... Shepard." The team watched him split off and go down the other hall, then they walked in the direction the warden had indicated to them.

As they moved down the passageway, they approached the 'interrogation rooms.' The rooms had external speakers with an additional guard standing in the hallway listening in. Shepard assumed it was to act as a safeguard to ensure the interrogator did not go too far, but she was apparently wrong. As she watched, the inside guard beat a prisoner with no questions being asked; it was obviously a punishment of some kind, not an interrogation. Mordin complained, "Inhumane. Unacceptable. Violation of basic organic dignity!"

At first, Shepard was inclined to ignore it, but the next prisoner down called to her for attention, asking if they were there to buy prisoners. When Shepard queried what he was talking about, the prisoner replied, "Sometimes people buy cons so they can do some punishing of their own, if you understand what I'm saying. I'd like you to buy me... anything would be better than this place."

Shepard went fishing for clarification, "I thought this ship was a prison, not a market."

The prisoner shrugged, "If the host world quits paying the maintenance fee, the warden sells us to whoever can pay enough."

Shepard scowled, starting to question if the facility was a prison or a glorified slave market. She looked at the prisoner again and asked what was happening in the interrogation next door. The prisoner grimaced, then answered, "That's Bimmy. He offed someone in the showers yesterday. The guy he killed was worth a lot of creds to the Warden. Sucks to be Bimmy right now. Warden doesn't take kindly to anyone costing him money."

Shepard had heard enough, and returned to the prisoner who was being beaten and told the guard to stop. When the guard didn't take kindly to her suggestion, she shrugged her shoulders, saying what she knew would motivate him. "This guy already cost the Warden creds. You kill him, whose paycheck is that coming out of?" The guard looked at her, then called into the cell, "Knock it off. At least for now..." Shepard just shook her head and walked away in disgust, knowing she'd report it to the Alliance, but being out in the Terminus, there probably wasn't a lot they'd be able to do.
They finally found the section labeled Outprocessing and when they entered, a technician directed them down to a door on the far side of the room. Shepard had thanked him and started heading that way when Warden Kuril's voice was broadcast over a loudspeaker. "My apologies, Shepard. You're more valuable as a prisoner than a customer. Drop your weapons and proceed into this open cell. You will not be harmed."

Shepard drew her shotgun and shouted, "Go to hell. I'll send you there myself." Kuril's response to her answer was to activate the station's security systems and send armed guards to take the team into custody. The team ran for cover and got ready for the fight as they heard boots rapidly approaching down the corridor. The first round of guards brought Fenris mechs, basically mechanical guard dogs, very similar to what they had faced at Freedom's Progress.

Nothing too hard to handle, especially with Miranda's biotics and Mordin's incineration tech. Mordin happily yelled, "Incinerate! Will burn through any armor!"

As the first fight ended, Miranda pushed them forward. "We've got to get Jack out of cryo." The team moved into the hallway and headed toward the supermax wing. They encountered a second group of guards and Shepard's irritation at the whole situation built to a crescendo. Shepard pulled on her biotic charge and crashed into the pile of guards. She was unprepared when one of the guards pulled up tech armor at the last second, and rather than sending him flying, she actually bounced off and stumbled to the floor. Only a well-timed warp from Miranda kept her from serious injury. When they managed to get through the second group, they entered the cryo storage control room. As Miranda examined the control panel, she came to a horrible realization. "Shepard! If we hack that control, every single door in the cellblock opens!" Between the situation with Liara and Kuril being a slave trader and now trying to capture her, Shepard was ready to take the whole prison down, and really didn't care what prisoners were released and who died in the process.

She looked at Miranda and simply said, "Too bad. We're getting what we came here for. Be ready." They were all surprised when the cryopod opened to reveal a diminutive tattooed human female. They were even more surprised when that same female surged with a biotic power that enabled her to run right through three heavy mechs.

Miranda called out, "We've got to get down there!" By the time the team drew weapons and worked their way down the stairwell, explosions were rocking the station and there were sounds of heavy fighting echoing through the hallways. As they emerged into the cryo room, all they found were three destroyed mechs and a huge hole in the wall where the door used to be. The team pressed on, in pursuit of Jack, the psychotic biotic.

As they emerged into the next hallway, they heard Warden Kuril make an announcement. "All guards: Restore order! Lethal force authorized! But don't kill Jack! Techs: Lockdown! Lockdown!" They were moving quickly, but Jack was moving faster and had already cleared the long hallway they had just entered. Shepard got a bit of satisfaction when an automated voice reported that three sectors had lost life support and there were no survivors; that meant no violent prisoners would be escaping from those areas, and the slavers guarding those sections had paid with their lives. They emerged into a large open area and still saw no sign of Jack; the biotic was certainly fast. They encountered both guards and prisoners in the room, and they were all equally hostile and all equally dead by the time Shepard and her team advanced into the next passageway. Shepard was poetry in motion. There were no civilians or innocent bystanders to worry about. If it wasn't Jack or one of her team, she killed them; no second thoughts, no looking back, no regrets.

As they moved through the doorway, the computer voice issued a new warning and let them know the power plant was overloaded and the station was going to experience a core systems failure. Core failure meant the entire station would lose everything... artificial gravity, power, and life support;
anyone left on the station at that time without a full envirosuit would be dead within an hour. Also, Kuril was yelling again, this time to lock down three additional prison blocks. He was rapidly losing control of his prison ship where nothing ever went wrong. Shepard sneered and pressed on. They entered another long room filled with guards, including a couple on an elevated platform; Shepard nailed both on the upper level with an incendiary shot to an explosive canister near them; the ensuing explosion blowing both of them across the room. The two on the ground level were relatively easy to eliminate and Shepard advanced her position with little difficulty. Another group of guards advanced on them, and the team worked to whittle them down. There was a large open space with lots of enemy crossfire; Shepard realized crossing the gap was going to be difficult with no cover so she did what any good Vanguard would do, she pulled on her biotics and charged. It was one of the longer charges she had ever accomplished, and it took her past a blind corner so all she could do was hope she got lucky.

Her luck did not hold. As she slammed into her target, two other guards popped up, accompanied by a heavy rocket mech. With the charge, Shepard had left Mordin and Miranda far behind with no hope of them being able to provide cover fire. She ducked quickly behind a barrier and started working on the guards, but every guard she took down gave the mech time to close the distance, limiting her options more and more with every step. She quickly swapped out her shotgun for her Locust submachine gun and started cutting into the mech's barrier while trying to avoid its rocket attacks. Mistiming one of her bursts, she took a direct rocket; it completely dropped her shields and forced her to duck into cover, allowing the mech to move forward unimpeded. With the mech so focused on Shepard, Miranda and Mordin were able to move up, and they blasted it with a warp and incineration blast at the same time. It staggered the mech just enough to cause a break in its firing pattern; Shepard took the opportunity to beat a hasty retreat to the next barrier back, allowing her shields time to regenerate.

Shepard moved to the upper level to get better coverage, but she took multiple shots during the transition, finally diving to cover behind a barrier wall. Grunting in pain, she stayed hidden behind the wall and applied medigel to her wounds, hoping her teammates contained the mech's movement enough to buy her sufficient time to complete her first aid. The number of guards in the room surged as reinforcements arrived, forcing the team to backtrack a bit to get better cover and prevent a flanking attempt. A guard had Mordin backed into a corner and Shepard pulled her biotics again and slammed into the enemy, allowing Mordin time to incinerate him. Keeping on the move, Shepard crossed a sky bridge with yet another charge and started working her way up the opposite side of the room. Her rapid movement up the far side of the room actually turned the tables, enabling her to reverse the flanking movement the guards had attempted. With fire from Mordin and Miranda coming from one side, Shepard was able to catch the guards in a deadly crossfire, finally clearing the room and enabling the team to take a quick breather and restock their thermal clip supplies.

Shepard knew they had made significant progress when she heard Kuril shout one more time. "All guards to Cellblock One!" They had reached the first cellblock within the facility; clear this last cellblock and they would be home free. As the trio rounded the corner, they saw yet another long room, just like the one they just had such difficulty traversing; it looked to be another long fight. Kuril was there, up on a high platform at the far end of the room. When he saw the team come in, he started talking. "You're valuable, Shepard. I could've sold you and lived like a king. But you're too much trouble." The Warden took a shot at them, forcing them into cover as he continued. "At least I can recapture Jack."

Shepard called him out, "Not happening! You're just a two-bit slave trader and I don't have time for it." Kuril was angry, "I do the hard things civil governments are unwilling to! This is for the good of the galaxy!" Shepard shook her head and looked at her team. "What is it with Turians and them thinking they all know what's best for the whole damn galaxy. He fucking sounds like Saren! Let's take his ass down and get outta here!" They exploded out of cover and spread out to begin working
their way through the new room, just like the last.

When the team started progressing, the Warden activated a shield over his location, powered by four individual pylons, each in a separate corner of the room. Miranda quickly took the first down with a warp, but the other three were going to provide more of a challenge to get to. Shepard needed to cross another sky bridge to get to one on an upper platform. The crossing was relatively easy, but she faced heavy resistance once she reached the other side. Fortunately she had plenty of cover and she was able to methodically progress toward the second pylon and destroy it. Mordin was following her, and helped with some well placed incinerations, opening critical avenues of approach. The pylon closest to Kuril was defended by the guard captain. A warp from Miranda and a cryo shot from Mordin set up a perfect biotic charge scenario for Shepard and she took it. While the captain's shields were down, Shepard charged in, shattering the captain's partially frozen body into thousands of pieces.

Being so close to Kuril, Shepard had no time to rest. She immediately took off away from the Warden and dove behind cover where he couldn't get a shot in on her. Completely by chance, her cover maneuver also put her easily within range of the last power pylon, which she quickly destroyed. With it gone, Kuril no longer had the special shielding over his platform and he became just another soldier with standard shields and armor. It wasn't long before the combined firepower of the Normandy team finished him off. Shepard glanced up at the elevated hallway where they first entered the facility and saw Jack running toward the exit. She called it out to her team and they made a run for the Normandy.

Jack couldn't believe her good fortune; some idiot actually released her from cryo and there wasn't a guard in the room, just three clunky mechs. She undid her fastenings and called up her biotic shockwave. As she dove forward right into the middle of them, she released all her power, throwing each of the three mechs to different corners of the room, crumpling them like foil against the bulkheads. She charged the door and slammed through it with the same power. She was determined that nothing was going to slow her down on her path to freedom. She didn't even give the guards a chance; after the beating and mistreatment they had given her since her incarceration, every corner she came around she already had her shockwave primed. She would step around the corner and let it rip, running through the wide open wake the shockwave left behind. Her progress was swift, and the prison had a hard time keeping up with her progress. She ran past a control room and launched a shockwave into it just for grins, and was rewarded by an automated voice announcing life support failure for three sectors. 

Fuckers! Serves 'em right! She kept on running.

As Jack passed the central hub, she launched another shockwave blindly into the room, and was again rewarded with an announcement. This time she had disabled some buffers, and it resulted in a pending central core overload. Jack hoped to find a way off the station, but if she didn't, as long as every guard and prisoner on board died along with her, she was ok with that. Her face lit with a feral grin and she kept on running.

She was getting close to the exit now, she could tell. She heard Kuril tell them not to kill her. Idiots. It just gave her that much more of an advantage as she worked her way to the docking bays. Jack ran into the main foyer for the prison. It was the large room where the Normandy crew had faced down the first two guards who wanted to 'relieve' them of their weapons. Those two were now the only thing between Jack and her freedom. Instead of a shockwave, Jack used biotic pulls, yanking them both off their feet and slamming them into bulkheads. She looked out the window at the docked vessel that was to be her salvation and screamed in frustration. "Cerberus!" She threw her arms around in frustration, her entire body glowing in biotics. The one organization in the galaxy which had been responsible for her imprisonment and torture as a child was the one that was here, probably
buying her from that damn Warden. While she ranted, she suddenly caught sight of a guard approaching from the side, but before she could even react, a shot rang out and the guard fell dead to the floor.

She turned toward where the shot originated and saw an auburn-haired female soldier with a huge gun pointed at her head... the minute Jack turned and faced her, the soldier pulled the barrel up and holstered her SMG. Jack stared at her and asked, "What the hell do you want?"

"My name is Shepard, and I'm here to get you off this ship."

Jack was having none of it, "I'm not going anywhere with you. You're Cerberus."

Shepard had no idea of Jack's prior relationship with the organization, so asked, "What does it matter if I'm with Cerberus?" Jack was surprisingly accommodating, "They been on my ass for years. Anytime I get free, they put a huge bounty on me. That's why Warden Kuril figured he'd struck gold when he caught me."

Miranda, of course, couldn't resist jumping up and defending Cerberus. "She's destroyed Cerberus property and killed Cerberus people. Hence the bounty."

Eyeballing Miranda, Jack simply responded, "You die first."

Shepard figured maybe honesty was the best policy, so tried that route. "I'm working with Cerberus for now because they can help me."

Jack was not impressed. "With them, for them... I don't care. You show up in a Cerberus frigate to take me away somewhere. You think I'm stupid?"

Shepard pressed the only advantage she knew she had. "This ship is going down in flames. We can get you to safety, and we're asking you for your help."

Miranda again offered to help the situation, "We could just knock her out and take her."

Jack laughed, "I'd like to see you try."

Shepard had enough, "Lawson, shut it! You're not helping. We're not going to attack her."

Jack appreciated Shepard's comment, "Good move. Look, you want me to come with you, make it worth my while."

Shepard stepped forward, "Tell me what you're thinking."

Jack was happy to explain her terms, "I bet your ship's got lots of Cerberus databases. I want to look at those files. See what Cerberus has on me. You want me on your team, let me go through those databases."

Shepard agreed, "I'll give you full access."

Miranda stepped in with a protest, "Shepard, you're not authorized to do that!"

Jack laughed again, "Ooohhhh, it upsets the cheerleader... even better. You better be straight up with me." Shepard nodded her head in agreement and Jack continued, "So why the hell are we still standing here?"

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After the vid call, Liara paced around the room, staring at the floor and repeatedly banging herself on the forehead in frustration at how she could have such difficulty expressing her emotions verbally. Even with Samantha, because they had become so adept at melding, Liara was still a cripple when it came to using words to express how she felt. They just always 'showed' one another. Liara had been totally unable to comfort her bondmate; instead, she had caused her additional distress.

*By the Goddess! How could I have been so unprepared? I am such an idiot! I should have known she would ask that! Why did I not tell her I love her? When Hannah sent her the message that it was going to happen, Liara had been so excited she completely failed to get ready, to put her thoughts together. She had entered the call blind and emotional and made a mess of it. She had been overjoyed to see Samantha, but then she was shocked at how viscerally Shepard had reacted to seeing her. Sam had been so dazed just by the sound of Liara's voice that she literally collapsed in a chair, unable to speak. When her shock wore off, she was so excited she couldn't contain herself. Liara had been completely overcome by the moment and hardly said anything in the entire twenty minutes, and then when she did speak, she didn't say the right things. It was like she was once again the shy archeologist with absolutely no experience in social situations.*

Then, Sam had closed the distance between them by approaching the screen and reaching out, trying to make contact over the light-years of distance between them, and Liara had been overwhelmed. She could only bury her face in her hands and cry, only coming out of her stupor when she heard the one-minute-remaining warning. When she finally put her hand on the screen they had almost run out of time and what had Liara offered? Love? Hope? No, Liara's final words to her loved one had been "Please understand. You've been gone two years." *What in the name of the Goddess was that?*

Liara could stand in a room of a thousand people and give an hour-long lecture without missing a beat, but she couldn't make it through a twenty minute conversation with her bondmate and remember to tell her that she loved her! *Goddess! I never even called her by her first name! What was I thinking?* It was only twenty minutes, but it was twenty minutes she could never get back and it was twenty minutes she might regret for the remainder of a very long, very *lonely* life.
The first stop after Jack's 'liberation' was the Normandy briefing room. Miranda welcomed her and tried to impress upon her that people followed orders onboard. Jack was having none of it, and spoke only to Shepard, referring to Miranda in the third-person as the Cerberus Cheerleader, even though she was in the room. Jack also made it clear that she expected the Cerberus files, and soon, or they might get to learn how much damage she could cause on the inside of the frigate. As she departed to go find quarters, Miranda gave Shepard a look of disgust and went to follow her out. Shepard called her back before she was able to leave the briefing room. "Miranda? A word, please?" As Miranda stopped and turned around, Shepard continued. "First things first. Don't ever question me in the field again unless I'm doing something so stupid it's going to get someone killed." Miranda went to say something, and Shepard stopped her with a raised hand. "You can't read my mind; you have no idea what I'm thinking... I could be bluffing. That incident with Jack... it was very obvious she has severe issues with Cerberus and your actions inflamed an already tense situation. It could have gotten someone hurt, or killed. I'm sorry I was abrupt, or even rude, but I was trying to diffuse a biotic who I think was considering warping you back to the prison blocks."

This time Miranda did interrupt, "So you were bluffing about the files?"

Shepard sighed, "Partially, but the point is you didn't know. I want to give her files, but just stuff that pertains to her. I have no intention of giving her independent access to any of our online systems, including the database. I want you to select what's releasable. And before you say 'nothing,' consider the fact that TIM provided her dossier, and I'm sure he anticipated what her conditions might be, and he did say convincing them to join our cause was up to me. I want to see copies of anything you give her. Any questions on that?"

Miranda nodded her head and said, "Understood, Commander." It was apparent she was still a bit ticked off, whether it was because of Jack or the way Shepard spoke to her was hard to tell.

Shepard decided to mollify her a bit. "Good. Next topic. You're very intelligent and can be very matter-of-fact. That's great with Salarians, and may be fine if you're operating in a small lab as a project lead, but that won't necessarily work with an operational crew. It's going to give you a 'cold-heart bitch' or 'ice queen' label pretty quickly. See if you can find it in yourself to be a bit more... diplomatic... count to three before you talk, try to think how the other person will hear it, whatever it takes. Stress on this mission is going to be high enough, without us irritating each other. I've seen the caring, concerned person you hide under your protective shell, and I'm pretty sure I like her. Let her out to play a little more often... I think she'll take you farther than you realize. Good so far?"

Miranda just stared at her for a moment, not really sure what to say. Caring? Concerned? "I... thank you, Shepard. I think... I'm not really sure I'll be able to do that with Jack, but I promise to try. Anything else, Commander? I have a lot to do and really should get back to work."

Shepard grimaced. "Yeah. One more thing and I know you're not going to like it. I've given Mordin instruction to remove any monitoring devices he finds..."

The commander didn't get to finish, as Miranda responded heatedly, "You told him to do that? You realize those devices were installed at the direction of the Illusive Man? This whole operation is expensive and he's protecting his investment! You had no right..."

This time, Shepard cut Miranda off. "Stand down, Operative Lawson. He does not have a right to invade the crew's personal liberties. I am not removing anything from public space, but he is not going to spy on people in their personal quarters. If it is an area where someone changes, sleeps,
showers, whatever, the devices are coming out. Not up for discussion. He has plenty of Cerberus crew like you and Ms Chambers to report on crew activities. He does not need video and audio recordings of what I consider our private lives. Privacy is limited enough onboard ship without worrying about a camera over my bed. And on that note, if I ever catch you lying to me again, XO or not, you'll find your ass deposited on the next planet with a shuttle terminal to find your own damn way home. Am I clear?"

Miranda was shocked. Shepard thought the look on her face was priceless until she found out the real reason why. Miranda's face grew pale as she started to speak, "I... Shepard. I had no idea. Honestly. There should not have been a camera over your bed. I... I don't even know what to say. I'll show you the feeds I have listed, and... there should not be one there. Not that I was made aware of." Miranda paused for a moment before continuing. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry! When you asked me directly, I would have told you. I won't lie to you Shepard."

Shepard looked at her XO and ordered, "The lab, Lawson. Now." She got up and walked out. Miranda sat there for a moment, stunned, before she jumped up and followed Shepard to the lab as instructed.

Once they were in the lab with the doors closed, the commander walked over to the professor. "Mordin, you need to hear this." Shepard's brow wrinkled with concern as she asked Miranda, "So you're telling me there are devices on this ship that even you are not aware of?"

Miranda was shaking her head in disbelief. "Apparently so, Commander. I'm sure the Illusive Man must know about them and will be angry that they ceased functioning, but I don't believe he'll ask me to fix something he never made me aware of. With your permission, I'd like to work with Mordin to find out exactly where he removed the devices from..." Miranda just trailed off, thinking what she really wanted to do was have Mordin scan her room as well. She wasn't sure if she'd have Mordin remove anything he found, but she wanted to know if the Illusive Man felt it necessary to monitor her activities. Miranda was suddenly afraid of what conversations had already been recorded and sent to the Illusive Man. Did he know she'd already defied one of his orders? Oh God. What do I do now?

"Mordin, map the locations of all monitoring devices on the ship, include those you removed and those you found but left. When you're done, compare what you have with Miranda's registered feeds. I'll be interested in that comparison, so inform me of any discrepancies you find." Shepard's focus shifted to Miranda, "Apparently your Illusive Man isn't as much a straight-shooter as you believed, is he? Thanks, guys. I'll be waiting for your report."

"Hey Karin! Busy?" The doctor turned to see a rather upbeat commander stepping into her med bay. "Just reviewing some medical reports, Commander. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Just doing crew rounds, and saved you for last. Thought maybe two old friends would have a bit to talk about...especially now that Mordin has removed the surveillance equipment from your med bay. God knows why TIM wanted video of every crewman getting naked for a physical. That man makes my skin crawl."

Karin's face showed an unusual flash of anger. "Yes, well. Other than a gross breach of Doctor-Patient confidentiality, I also take offense to the lack of trust in my accurately reporting crew medical readiness status."

Shepard grimaced. "Yeah, well, I might start to at least give him some grudging respect if he ever showed us any. All I've seen from him are new and better ways to use and abuse us. Anyway! Didn't
come here to complain about TIM... I came to chat with my friend Karin."

Karin smiled. "If this is a social visit... you know... I regretted not drinking my original bottle of Serrice Ice when I still could. I'd very much like to avoid making the same mistake again. Would you join me in some brandy, Samantha?"

Shepard laughed. "Now that sounds like a plan! You grab the bottle, I'll get the glasses!"

The two friends chatted easily into the evening hours, Shepard happy to have the travel time to Korlus to relax a little. The two friends reminisced about the old days, on the Fuji and then on the original Normandy, and eventually talked of the expected horrors in front of them on the SR-2. Karin was grieving over some of the doctors she knew at the field clinics in the colonies that had gone dark, and Shepard reflected that because of her two-year absence, she hardly knew where any of her friends were, so didn't even know who to morn. Karin looked at her friend sadly. "I'm sorry, Samantha. I know this has got to be difficult for you. To readjust your whole life after two years passed you by. At least your mother and Liara are still with us." At her last words, even in her slightly inebriated state, Karin saw a stricken look pass over the commander's face. "Dear God, Samantha. What's happened?"

Samantha downed her glass and refilled it before answering. "I have no idea, Karin. My mom is great, but something's happened to Liara. God, that's sounds awful. I mean...she's ok, at least physically, but something is going on that she won't tell me about." Samantha then told her everything ... about the meeting with TIM and then the conversation with her mom, ending with the vid call with Liara. Sam sighed. "Mom says she loves me, but I think she's moved on, Karin. And now I'm forcing her to come to grips with the fact that I haven't. I mean, you don't just stop loving someone when they die, but that doesn't mean you stay 'in love' with them anymore." Sam sighed and stood up. "Thanks for the brandy, Karin, but I... I've gotta go." Sam was out of the med bay before Karin even managed to get out of her chair to say goodbye. Karin drew a shuddering breath, afraid to even contemplate the outcome of the mission if Samantha lost the one thing in the galaxy she truly felt was worth fighting for. She sat down at her terminal and typed out a short note to Hannah before retiring for the evening.

Returning to her cabin, Sam picked up her desk chair and threw it across the room in frustration, letting out a primal yell. Edi’s voice chimed into the cabin, "Commander Shepard? I have detected unusual activity in your room. Do you require assistance?"

Sam stopped dead in her tracks and ran her fingers through her hair, then interlaced her fingers on the top of her head and growled out a response, "No, Edi. I'm fine. Just angry. I'll get over it."

Edi volunteered assistance. "If you are experiencing anger issues, I can dispatch Yeoman Chambers..."

Samantha did not let her finish. "No! Absolutely not! Matter of fact, just note this now. That woman in not authorized in my private chambers. Ever. Is that clear?"

Edi answered promptly, "Understood, Commander. Is there anything I can do for you, then?"

Sam sighed, "No Edi, just leave me alone for at least six hours. I'm going to get some sleep."

"Understood, Commander. Signing you out."

Sam threw herself down on the bed in disgust. Even with all the cameras and microphones removed, she still didn't have privacy in her own damn room. She was glad they would be at Korlus tomorrow, and she hoped it wasn't a simple mission; she felt like she needed something to shoot. She tried to
think what she would write as her first message to Liara, and was totally unable to come up with anything that didn't sound either extremely distant or extremely desperate. She fell asleep still dwelling on the issue and no closer to any answers. It was no surprise when she tossed herself out of the bed as a result of another nightmare. This one was particularly troublesome. Shepard was used to dreaming about her final moments, and had usually managed to turn her thoughts to the beach on Thessia, just as she had done in real time. However, this dream left her shaken and wide awake, with no hope of returning to sleep. She had actually been at the escape pod with Liara and her last vision was of Liara slamming the door in her face with words echoing in her helmet, "Sorry, Shepard. No room for you..." She was then thrown into fire by the explosive blast launching the escape pod away from her.

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Shepard put boots on the ground on Korlus with Miranda, Mordin and Zaeed. Even though Mordin had more research to complete on the Collector's stasis weapon, he was about to have three uninterrupted days while they did the armor refit in dry-dock. The commander took this as an off-ship opportunity to discuss TIM's monitoring systems on the Normandy and to push Miranda farther down the path of playing nice with others. When the time came at the end of the mission to steal the Normandy and pass it over to the Alliance, Shepard hoped to have the XO's faith in the Illusive Man well shaken by then; maybe even enough for her to actually go along with the plan.

On Korlus, they would most likely be facing Blue Suns mercenaries, so Zaeed had really pressed her to be on the mission, and Shepard saw no reason to refuse him; he was a good gun, reliable and fast. He had proven himself more than once on the Omega mission. As they dropped out of the shuttle and ducked behind cover, a loudspeaker barked out instructions. "There is only one measure of success: kill or be killed! Perfection is your goal."

Zaeed chuckled, "All right! Looks like there's some killing to be done, then!"

Shepard glanced at her team, "Stay focused and remember we're looking for a Krogan warlord. Try not to shoot him." As the next announcement rang out over the loudspeaker, Shepard had flashbacks to Virmire. The mystery voice spoke about earning a place in a mighty army, and Shepard immediately pictured rows of cloning tanks and the Krogan, Doctor Droyas. Only this time I don't have a whole team of Salarians and an improvised nuke. Hope this turns out better than Virmire did...

Shepard couldn't believe how much junk was piled everywhere; the planet's description as 'a garbage scow with a climate,' was pretty darn accurate. However, it did provide lots of cover as they advanced along the pathways. Mordin interrupted her ruminations when he called out, "Lookout position, equipped for combat." There were only three guards, who went down pretty quickly, so the team advanced easily into the compound. As they rolled over a small hill, they found a fourth merc who had been injured, cussing because he thought he was going to bleed out. Miranda and Shepard looked at one another and shrugged; he really wasn't in that bad of shape, but they had no desire to tell him that. As they approached, he started rambling about them not being berserkers, and then clammed up, saying he wasn't going to tell them anything.

Shepard glared at him. "You're not in the best bargaining position. I'm looking for a Krogan Warlord named Okeer."

The wounded merc shook his head, "Who? You already know more than I do, unless it's the old guy in the lab. He dumps crazy Krogan down here all the time. Our job is to kill them."

The team had to laugh when Mordin quipped, "Does not know the meaning of 'won't tell you anything.' Apparently delirious."
With that, the merc glared at Mordin, "They don't pay me enough to goddamn bleed out!"

Shepard waved her omnitool in front of him... "I have medigel if I get the rest of the story..."

The merc nodded, "Fine. I don't give a shit about their little project. Jedore hired him to make her an army, but the Krogan he creates are insane, so we use them for live fire practice." Suddenly the mercs radio came to life, asking for directions toward a Krogan pack.

Shepard glared at him as she spoke. "You heard the man. He needs directions. Make sure they're good ones if you want to live past the next minute."

The merc's eyes got wide and Shepard knew her message got through. He got on the radio and sent them off on a wild goose chase to clear the path toward the labs. Shepard complimented him on his wisdom and asked, "What's Jedore planning to do with all these Krogan?"

Shepard grimaced. "Replace us probably. Wouldn't want to see an army of them coming at me. But they're crazy, she can't control them."

Shepard nodded, "So where's the lab and what's between here and there?"

The merc laughed, "There's big anti-ship guns, but once you're on the ground there's crap. We're not outfitted to fight goddamn commandos. Just follow the path up. When you get to the top, you find the lab."

"Alright. You fulfilled your end of the bargain." Shepard dosed him with medigel and told him to go find a shady spot to sit out the rest of the fight. The minute he turned to shuffle off, Shepard knocked him out and took his radio, throwing it to Zaeed.

Zaeed nodded in agreement, "Was wondering if you were gonna let him rat us out. Answers that question."

Shepard stepped off to continue up the hill, "Come on, folks. Daylights wasting!" They didn't progress far when they came up against another outpost with a couple more mercs. Four against two wasn't very fair, but that was the pattern through the next three lookout positions. Shepard knew it would happen eventually, and she knew it did when the radio she had tossed to Zaeed barked again with someone looking for Team 4. The next announcement was to tell Jedore there was a problem because patrols were going dark. Shepard grinned, "Well, kids, looks like we've been found out. Things might start to get interesting!"

As they approached the fifth lookout post, they found a lot more Blue Suns waiting for them, including a couple of guys with rocket launchers. As one of the rockets curled around to crash into Shepard and throw her onto her back, she realized they were guided rocket launchers. Time momentarily froze for Shepard. Sometimes her mind picked the most inconvenient times for flashbacks, but she suddenly thought of the fight on Peak 15 when she had been caught off guard by a Geth Shock trooper and it flattened her just like that rocket had done. As she bounced back up onto her feet, she fully expected the same cuff on the back of her head for not paying better attention...and her chest ached at the thought of Blue not being there to deliver it. Her throat got tight and she shook her head to clear her misting eyes, brought back to the present by Miranda asking if she was ok. Shepard grunted, "Yeah, just knocked the wind out of me for a sec. Let's move!"

The team passed through a relatively narrow passageway and when it opened back up into a room on the far side, they found a group of Blue Suns shooting at one of the supposed 'crazy Krogans.' When they rolled in and started helping the Krogan, the Blue Suns team lead called out, "Code Six! Off-world presence! Shift fire from the Krogan! Hostiles in the compound!" In response, the mystery
voice came over the loudspeaker once again. Shepard assumed it was Jedore, as the voice intoned, "We have guests in the compound. If they're not killed immediately, all bonuses will be denied!"

Busy killing mercs, Shepard still had to laugh at her team's banter. Mordin yelled out, "Financial motivation. Generally good tactic for mercs!"

Miranda followed up with, "Yeah, too bad it's not good for us!"

And Zaeed brought it home with, "We just made ourselves enemy number one, Shepard! Every paid merc in this entire compound now wants us dead."

Shepard actually grinned as she responded to them all, "At least we won't have to hunt them down now. They'll be coming to us!" After they finished off the Blue Suns, Shepard put away her SMG and approached the Krogan unarmed.

Miranda swung out to the side with her pistol drawn and whispered through clenched teeth, "Shepard! Are you crazy?" The commander did not respond, focusing on the Krogan that approached her.

To her surprise, the Krogan stopped and sniffed her. "You... are different. New. You don't smell like this world. Seven night cycles, and I have felt only the need to kill. But you... something makes me speak."

After speaking with the Krogan for a bit, they discovered he was tank-bred. The Krogans emerged from the tanks full-size and received some type of subliminal training while they grew. This particular Krogan had been released from the tank because he was not perfect, but had no idea what 'perfect' was. Mordin commented, "A breeding program. Trying to escape Genophage effects?"

The Krogan looked at Mordin and answered, "Escape? Escape was never whispered. Survive. Resist. Ignore. Survival is what I hear in my head. Against the enemy that threatens all my kind. But I failed even before waking."

Shepard asked the Krogan about the lab and speaking to Okeer. The Krogan didn't have much information, other than the lab was 'up.' He then moved a huge metal plate out of the way for them and opened up a new passageway, but he would not go with them. He said, "I will fight if they come. I kill, but only here. I am not perfect, but I have purpose. I must wait until called. Released."

Shepard felt bad for the Krogan, knowing that its 'purpose' was live target practice, but had nothing to offer the Krogan that would convince it otherwise. Her only solace would be in destroying the lab that produced such subservient creatures; with that thought in mind, she pressed the team forward.

Once on the other side of the wall, the passages seemed narrower and, knowing the Code Six had been announced, they anticipated meeting heavy resistance. Shepard heard a merc call out, "They're loose! Run for your damn life! They're all free!" She immediately pulled out her shotgun and expected things to get very interesting as they cleared the next turn. After clearing two mercs, they ran headlong into heavily armored Krogan. While the commander and Zaeed were the heavy hitters, Shepard was very happy to have Mordin's incinerate tech skill and Miranda's warp. After they managed to work their way through the Krogan charge, the radio chattered again, "Krogan took down the grid! We're blind and getting hit on all sides! Where are the heavies?" That put Shepard on alert, and once again she wished she had Liara and her barrier at her back. She had no desire to run into mercs with heavy weapons, but it seemed they had no option.

As they popped through the next doorway, they found the rocket troops and got bombarded before they could even find cover. Shepard took two shots in rapid succession, the first dropping her shields and the second knocking her on her ass. She grunted in pain, rolling behind a low wall for cover, and
fought to stay conscious. Liara would be furious at her for not wearing her helmet. She figured she probably had a concussion, as she was experiencing slight tunnel vision. Miranda slid in beside her, providing cover fire, and prevented her from getting up. Once the rocket troops were down, she left Mordin and Zaeed to handle the regular mercs and looked down to take care of the commander. Shepard saw actual concern in Miranda's face as she started her exam, and while she didn't have time to think about that right now, she filed that fact away for later contemplation. Miranda stuck a hyp-spray onto Shepard's neck and injected something and the commander felt her blood sing and her vision immediately cleared. "What the hell was that?"

Miranda laughed, "Never mind, you wouldn't recognize the name anyway... just think of it as some really concentrated caffeine. It's good for a couple hours, but then you're going to crash, so let's get this done, shall we?" She stood up and offered the commander a hand. Shepard hesitated for just a moment before taking the assist. Shepard smiled and clapped Miranda on the shoulder in thanks. She was surprised when she got an honest smile in return, one that actually made it all the way to Miranda's eyes. The ice queen thaws!

After they made it past the rocket brigade, the next couple of levels just had regular mercs, which the foursome made relatively quick work of. Shepard got to play ping pong a couple of times, enjoying the Vanguard charge and her close-up shotgun kills. Shepard knew they had made serious progress when she heard a call for reinforcements that included everyone out of the labs. The chatter wording was "Every floor, every outpost! Move!" Shepard grinned... they had the Blue Suns' backs to the wall. The next level had a couple more rocket troops, but Shepard quickly discovered the best way to handle them was to let the rockets fly, then charge. They were totally unprepared for close-up or hand-to-hand and easily dispatched, with the charge taking away every advantage of the long distance rockets.

They cleared yet one more level and ran out of steps. They had finally reached the upper level, which was crawling with Blue Suns. Shepard had to pay back the favor when Miranda took a hard hit and went down. Shepard slid in beside her to provide cover and ensure she got medigel and whatever else she needed. When she got her breath back, she sat up and gently gripped Shepard's arm and earnestly said, "Thank you, Shepard."

It was Shepard's turn to stand and offer an assist up. "No worries, Miranda. Looks like we're starting to actually develop as a team." Miranda actually blushed at the compliment.

As they cleared one last door, Shepard came to a screeching halt. Of all people, before her stood Rana Thanoptis, from Saren's lab at Virmire. "Shepard! Don't shoot! You know me! I shut down the security cams as soon as I saw it was you. Never thought I'd say it, but I'm glad it's you shooting up the place!"

Shepard just shook her head.  "I assume you have a good reason for being at this lab?"

Rana nodded, "Don't worry; I'm not wasting the chance you gave me. My work here is strictly beneficial! Not for the mercs. Jedore's on a power trip, but Okeer is trying to do something good... even if his methods are a little extreme."

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "It's just odd that you keep showing up at places where the methods are a little extreme. I've had this discussion before about a right way and a wrong way to do things. The ends do not always justify the means. What exactly is Okeer trying to do?"

Rana heard the implied threat loud and clear, "I just created the mental imprinting routine to educate the Krogan...but most don't get through it. Okeer dumps them for some reason. He's not looking for a Genophage cure, and he's not going for numbers, that's all I know."
"So once again, you're working on a project that you don't totally understand. You don't even know his end goals?" Shepard was not pleased with Rana's excuses.

Rana didn't help her cause, "So, maybe I'm not the best example of moral research, but give me a little credit for trying. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to run like hell before you blow the place up. I know how you work."

Mordin glanced at Shepard, "Should have killed her. Too much knowledge without ethical boundaries." Shepard had been on the borderline of that decision and Mordin's comment pushed her over the edge. She activated her omnitool.

Zaeed was outside the door when he got the buzz. "Z-man. That Asari doesn't leave alive." Shepard's answer was the rattle of Zaeed's assault rifle.

As the team entered into the next room, they all saw a Krogan scientist and a single large breeding tank with what appeared to be a full-grown Krogan inside. The scientist spoke as they entered the room. "It's about time. I've watched your progress. The batteries on these tanks will not wait while you play with these idiotic mercs."

Shepard furrowed her brow, "Don't you want to know who I am before you start making demands?"

Shepard was surprised at Okeer's next statement, "I know you, Shepard. Your own demands will come, I'm sure. You weren't dragged back from death because someone needed a diplomat." He turned and looked at the commander. "Surprised? All Krogan know you. I'm sure Rana has already revisited your actions on Virmire."

Shepard scowled, "She won't be revisiting Virmire ever again... trust me, you don't want to either. I did what I had to do."

If the Krogan could smile, Okeer made his best attempt at one, "Ah, but you misjudge me, Shepard. I approve! Saren's pale horde was not true Krogan. The mistake of an outsider; the same one these mercenaries have made. I gave Jedore my rejects, but she grows impatient. It's time for you to take me out of here."

As he gestured outward, Shepard followed Warlord Okeer's glance out of the loft to the main room below. She saw a room filled with at least thirty breeding tanks and still wondered how this was any different than Virmire. Mordin spoke abruptly, "Personal issues irrelevant. Here for the Collectors."

Okeer was dismissive and stated, "I see. Yes, Collector attacks have increased. A human concern. My requests were focused elsewhere. I acquired the knowledge to create one pure soldier. With that, I will inflict upon the Genophage the greatest insult an enemy can suffer. To be ignored."

Mordin's comment refocused Shepard, she addressed the Krogan, "Your methods are extreme; you are willing to let thousands die or be gunned down by Jedore's mercs to get just one soldier. But I need your information on the Collectors. If I promise you safe passage, will you join us?"

Okeer nodded. "Perhaps we can strike a deal, but my prototype is non-negotiable. It is the key to my legacy." Miranda visibly bristled at the Krogan's statement and Shepard understood why; Okeer's comments bore a striking similarity to how Miranda had described her father as a genetic manipulator to secure his 'dynasty.'

Before the commander could address it, Jedore was on the loudspeaker again, "I've traced the Krogan release to Okeer, of course. I'm calling 'blank slate' on this project. Gas the commandos and flush the tanks!"
As gas started venting into the lab, Okeer shouted at Shepard, "She's so weak-willed she'll kill my legacy with a damn valve! If you want your Collector information, you will stop her!"

Shepard rolled out of the lab at top speed, her team in trail, and ran down the steps to the main floor. As soon as they entered the tank room, Shepard called her biotic charge and slammed into Jedore, only to realize she was heavily shielded and accompanied by an armored heavy mech. Her team was right behind her and Miranda warped the merc, dropping her shields, while Mordin launched an incineration attack on the mech's armor. Without her shields, Zaeed was more than happy to drop the Blue Suns leader on the spot. The team's initial assault was so fast, Jedore never got a shot off. The mech was a different story and was busy rattling away with both a Gatling gun and rockets. Fortunately, the room provided a lot of cover, and the four organics were a lot more mobile than the clunky mech, so they easily flanked it. Once Mordin burned its armor off, Shepard called another charge and slammed into the mech, driving it backward. Mordin followed up with a quick cryoblast and Shepard promptly shattered the mech to pieces with a point-blank shotgun blast.

Before the ice pieces even stopped bouncing, Miranda called out, "Shepard! Alarms in the lab! What the hell is Okeer doing back there?" The team turned on their heels and beat a hasty return to Okeer and his precious legacy. As they bounded up the steps, Edi cut in on their comm channel, attempting to answer Miranda's question, "The alarms coincided with a systems failure. The remaining lab systems are unprotected, and I have gained only limited access. According to lab scanners, the room is flooded with toxins and Okeer's personal life signs are failing rapidly."

As they attempted to open the door, a computerized voice rang out, "Contamination detected. Emergency vent in progress." Shepard banged on the door control panel in frustration, "Open, damn you!" The door finally slid open when the computerized voice announced, "Decontamination complete."

When they finally got into the room, they heard Okeer speaking, and Shepard had hope. As they approached, they realized it was a recording and the actual Krogan was stretched out on the floor, dead. The vid looped in the background, "Shepard, if I knew why the Collectors wanted humans, I would tell you. But everything is in my prototype. My legacy is pure. This... one soldier, this grunt. Perfect."

Shepard walked up and kicked Okeer's body, "Goddammit!" Mordin and Miranda were speaking about the prototype, but Shepard tuned them out, pacing back and forth trying to figure out what to do. Suddenly she stopped and stared at the tank. Getting on the comm, she asked Edi if one of the cargo bays could be configured to provide the necessary power to sustain the tank. After a very brief evaluation, Edi responded to the positive and Shepard nodded, "Good. Joker, Okeer is a no go, but we have a package that needs retrieval... and he's a big one."

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In the Normandy conference room, Miranda and Jacob debated on what to do with the Krogan. Miranda was concerned, "Bringing the Krogan on board for study makes sense, but I hope Shepard has no intention of waking it."

Jacob just sighed, "Yeah, you've said that a few times now."

As Shepard walked in, Miranda looked at her as she spoke, "A normal Krogan is dangerous. This one was created and educated by a madman."

Shepard crossed her arms. "I see everyone's excited about our new paperweight. I have to admit, I wish I asked Thanoptis a bit more about the education program, but too late for that now."
Miranda followed up, "Exactly! We don't know anything about it!"

Shepard laughed, "I know! Don't you find that exciting? A challenge to be tackled? Where's your sense of adventure, Lawson?"

Jacob just shook his head in amazement at the commander while Miranda continued to press her point, "Krogan fight well at close quarters. Perhaps awakening him in a confined space wouldn't be prudent."

Shepard grinned, "And I'm a Vanguard. Love to get up close and personal myself. A match made in heaven."

Lawson's jaw dropped. "Surely you're joking, Commander!"

Shepard was still grinning. "Absolutely... not! He's either a ticking time bomb or an incredible ally. I prefer to find out sooner rather than later. So, if you care to accompany me, I'm headed to the cargo bay." As they rode down in the elevator, Shepard made it very clear they were to stay back and let her handle waking the Krogan. She instructed them to take no action against him unless he actually caused her physical harm. "I've worked with Krogan before. He's going to get physical; he's going to make contact. As long as we are still talking, take no aggressive actions at all. If you can't refrain, don't come in. Understood?" All three entered the room, but Miranda and Jacob held back at the door.

As Shepard approached the tank, Edi came online and informed her the integration of the tank into the shipboard systems had been seamless and the Krogan was stable. Shepard was all business. "I assume you mean physically stable. Is he aware of his surroundings at all?"

"Current neural patterns indicate minimal cognition. Barring ship-wide power loss, the nutrients in the tank should sustain him for over a year."

Shepard walked around the tank, examining what she could of the Krogan before opening up the pod. "Yeah, that won't be necessary because we're gonna crack the egg."

Edi responded, "Cerberus protocol is very clear regarding untested technology."

Shepard countered, "He's not 'technology.' He's a Krogan, and he's either friendly or not. He's too valuable to leave, and too dangerous to just have hanging out as an unknown quantity. I am opening the tank. Stand by."

Shepard approached the control panel and activated the birthing protocols. She stepped back from the tank as it started draining the nutrient fluid. As the tank emptied, the glass cover lifted up and the restraining bands released the Krogan. He fell forward out of the tank, landing on his knees, and coughed the fluid out of his lungs. As he stood, Shepard approached slowly. Suddenly his eyes narrowed and he charged her, scooping her up and slamming her into a bulkhead, pinning her there with her feet suspended above the floor. Miranda drew her pistol, but Jacob forced the barrel down and kept her from pointing it at the Krogan.

The Krogan held Shepard in place and started speaking. "Human. Female. Before you die, I need a name."

"I'm Commander Shepard, and I don't take threats lightly. I suggest you relax."

The Krogan's eyes narrowed. "Not your name. Mine. I am trained. I know things, but the tank... Okeer couldn't implant connection. His words are hollow. Warlord... legacy... grunt. Grunt was among the last. It has no meaning. It'll do... I am Grunt. If you are worthy of your command, prove
Shepard sneered. "Why do you want me to kill you? You just woke up; you should want to live for more than five minutes."

Grunt actually laughed. "Big words for a squishy human. I do what I am meant to... fight. There is no 'want.' I feel nothing for Okeer or his clan. That imprint failed. He has failed. Without a reason, one fight is as good as any other. Might as well start one with you."

Shepard glared at the Krogan and said, "Okeer doesn't matter. He's dead. My clan is strong and we have worthy enemies. Join us and you'll have plenty of good fights. You will have purpose."

Grunt drew back just slightly, "Nothing in the tank indicated humans could be so forceful. You command as though you've earned it."

"My enemies threaten galaxies. Everyone on my ship has earned their place."

"Hmmm... Hmph! That's acceptable... I'll fight for you." Grunt released the commander and started to step back.

Shepard responded, "I'm glad you saw reason." As Grunt finished his withdrawal, he saw that Shepard had a pistol stuck to his plating.

He approved. "Ha! Offer one hand, but arm the other. Wise, Shepard. I find that you would be a worthy foe. If this... arrangement... does not work out, I will be honored to fight you."

Shepard chuckled. "No worries on that account. You'll have more than enough enemies to fight where we are going."

As Shepard walked out of the cargo bay, Miranda holstered her pistol and followed her to the elevator. "You really are bloody suicidal, aren't you Shepard?"

The commander laughed. "Nah, I knew you had my back Miranda... even if Jacob did try to stop you."

Miranda's head snapped up. "You had a Krogan smashing you into the bulkhead, and you still saw that?"

Shepard stopped and turned to the operative. "It's my job, Miranda. It's going to take all of us being at the top of our games and it's going to take teamwork to survive this mission. That's why I invited you down with me. I trust you, and I trust you to do your job."

Miranda looked at the commander. "This is listed as a suicide mission, Shepard. You really expect anyone to survive?"

Shepard raised her eyebrows. Her response was spoken with such conviction it left no room for doubt. "Not just anyone. Everyone. I've been brought back and offered a second chance at life. I have no intention of tossing that chance away, and if anyone plans on using this mission to commit suicide, they've joined the wrong team." Shepard stepped out of the elevator and left an open-mouthed Miranda staring after her.
Shepard made a beeline to the lab to talk to Mordin; she had a lot more to discuss with him than just the monitoring devices on the ship. As she rolled in and said hello, Mordin started speaking without being prompted. "Shepard. Glad you are here. Talked about work, about Genophage study. Wasn't entirely honest. Lie of omission. Also other kinds. Mission too important for secrets. Need to clear the air. Work on Genophage more than just study."

Shepard crossed her arms and prompted Mordin to continue, "Had a feeling there had to be more to it than that. You're too talented to waste on just a study."

Mordin turned and looked away as he continued. He felt guilty about not telling the commander, and couldn't face her while he explained what they had done. "Apologize. Classified information. But you've earned full story. Initially was just study, but discovered Krogan population was increasing. Krogan were adapting and overcoming Genophage." He turned back to the commander as he finished.

Shepard stood up straight and uncrossed her arms, then leaned forward onto the lab table, completely focused on Mordin, "What did your team do when you learned of this?"

Mordin stepped up to the table and met Shepard eye-to-eye. "Personally led science team. Geneticists, chemists, sociologists, mathematicians. Created new version of Genophage. Released it on Tuchanka, other Krogan-centric areas. Restabilized Krogan population."

"Did you all consider other options? Was this really the last resort?" The commander knew if the Salarians were nothing else, they were thorough. She was just looking for confirmation.

"No, last resort would be genocide, but dismissed that quickly. Thought of thousands of other possibilities. Modified Genophage offered best outcome. Stabilized population. Avoided publicity that could incite Krogan anger. Best solution for whole galaxy, Krogan included."

"How did you distribute the virus? I assume you had to blanket the entire planet?"

"Covert drops. Hospitals, clan centers, water supplies. Very difficult. Few Salarians on Tuchanka. Team got caught a few times, had to fight free. Messy. Better when things went as planned." Mordin was clearly uncomfortable, but he continued. "It was one of those fights where right horn was injured. Very painful. Don't care to repeat."

Shepard sympathized with executing a plan that didn't go the way you unexpected. "I doubt you've told many people about this, Mordin. I appreciate you letting me know."

Mordin nodded. "Should get back to work. Am very close to solving stasis issue. Anything more, Shepard?"

It was Shepard's turn to nod. "Actually, yes, Mordin, that was your topic, not mine. But that's great news on the stasis!" Shepard then asked about getting a secure communication device that operated independent of the ship's systems. "I need something that enables burst transmissions that bypasses the surveillance systems on the Normandy, so I can converse with the Alliance, my mom, and my bondmate without Cerberus intercepting and listening in to the communication."

Mordin flashed a quick smile. "That's easy. Have spare." Mordin dug around in his tool chest and pulled out a small gray box. "No audio or video, but provides independent, secure text, short burst transmission via STG reporting node. Designed for covert mission status updates. Must be in close
proximity to communications buoy for direct connection. Will establish an independent account for you. Will try to have it by tomorrow. Can show you basic operation then."

"Thanks, Mordin. If this thing works, I'll owe you big. I'll let you get back to work now." Shep walks out, her mood better than it had been since her disastrous vid call with Liara. Maybe I'll be able to figure out for sure what's happening on Illium and get this all sorted out...

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Shepard walked into the Armory, and Jacob was busy working at his station completing additional weapons modifications and armor upgrades, as usual. Shepard gave him a shout, "Jacob! You're working too hard. You ever take a break?"

Jacob issued a soft chuckle as he turned around. "With you as the commander? Have to say, you run the ship tight, and we're getting things done. Miranda has us buying and installing every upgrade and advanced mod we can find. It's a privilege to serve on the Normandy, Commander, and I'll do my best to make sure we succeed. There's no rest of the weary."

Shepard crossed her arms and tried to look stern, but she liked the prior Corsair pilot and his code of ethics, so she was smiling as she gently chastised him. "Rest time is just as important, Jacob. We're in this for the long haul and our mission brings a lot of risk. You need something to keep the stress down."

Jacob shrugged his shoulders, "And what do you do in your spare time, other than release crazy Krogan in the cargo bay?"

Shepard laughed. "You know, that was actually kind of a letdown. I fully expected to have to fight him to show dominance. He surprised me by being a thinker. Now I'll still have to go down to the shuttle deck and work out. I prefer other... physical activities... over going to a gym. That's so boring."

Jacob smiled, "If I didn't know better, I'd think that was an obscure way to hit on me, but I'll be straight up; I'm not interested in any type of relationship with my boss other than a professional one. No offense. As far as stress relief, I have a pretty regimented workout program that's great for stress. Blows off a lot of steam and helps me sleep at night. I'm good."

Shepard laughed. "Other physical activities means stuff like the battle arena at the Citadel, Armax? I love that place. I try to go whenever I have time. But as long as you have something to break routine, that's good enough by me. You be sure to let me know if you need anything."

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When Edi informed her of a call from the Illusive Man, Shepard headed on down to the communications center and stepped into the holographic scanner. TIM had quite the announcement. Another colony, Horizon, had just gone dark and Shepard was to head there directly. He asked, "Has Mordin delivered the countermeasure for the seeker swarms?"

Shepard shook her head. "No he hasn't, but I just finished talking to him and he said he's close. We're in the Eagle Nebula right now, so we're on the other side of the damn Galactic Core. It's going to take us at least twelve hours to get to Horizon, maybe as much as sixteen, depending on if we need to stop to discharge any heat. Probably fastest to transit via Omega. Anyway, we just picked up a Krogan. Okeer ended up dead, so we ended up with his prodigy, Grunt."

TIM nodded. "Yes, I already received the mission report from Miranda. Considering the
circumstances, she was very complimentary... right up to the point where you decided to wake it up in the cargo bay. She felt it was an unnecessary risk, but I'm not going to second-guess your decisions in the field. I take it since you are talking to me now, it went without any significant difficulties?"

Shepard agreed, "Yes, it did. We'll test him on Horizon; see how he does against the Collectors."

TIM finished up. "Good. Twelve hours... let's hope Mordin Solus works well under pressure. There's something else you should know." He paused and took a long drag on his cigarette before continuing. "One of your former crew, Ashley Williams, is stationed on Horizon."

"I just talked to Anderson on the Citadel and he said something about her being on special assignment... classified, so he wouldn't tell me anything else." Shepard was curious as to why Ash would be in the Terminus Systems.

TIM seemed to have all the answers. "Officially, it's an outreach program to improve relations with the colonies, but they're up to something. If they sent Lieutenant Williams, it must be big. Perhaps you should take it up with her."

Shepard was shaking her head. "The Collectors just happened to pick a colony with one of my former crew? I don't buy it. Give the Alliance a heads-up, I'll get the ship underway, and let Mordin know he's on the clock."

TIM was all sunshine and rainbows, "It shouldn't be a surprise the Collectors are interested in you, especially if they're working for the Reapers. Keep your head down, Shepard. This whole thing could be a ruse to try to trap or kill you again. They might be going after her to get to you."

Shepard was getting impatient. "Noted. I'd like to get going, if you don't mind."

TIM closed out, "This is the most warning we've ever had, Shepard. Be careful...and good luck." As TIM closed down the communication, Shepard told Joker to get them to Horizon with all possible speed, but to dump heat before arrival because they needed full stealth capability. Then she went to talk to Mordin.

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Mordin had made the breakthrough they needed, so the next ten hours were spent modifying everyone's armor against the seeker swarms. When they hit the ground, Shepard had Mordin, Miranda and Grunt by her side. There was a massive ship standing across the colony, with an energy storm surrounding and obscuring its upper reaches. Shepard felt a chill run down her spine followed by a surge of anger as she realized this was the Collector ship that was responsible for the destruction of the Normandy. "So, Mordin... you sure these armor upgrades are gonna work?"

He was behind her, so Shepard didn't see his shrug as he answered, "Certainty impossible. In limited numbers, should confuse detection, make us invisible to detection. In theory."

Miranda echoed with a question, "In theory?"

Mordin answered earnestly, "Experimental technology. First field test. Should be exciting."

Shepard saw winged creatures landing in a field in front of them, "Well, we may be about ready to test it... incoming!"

Suddenly Grunt... well... grunted; then roared and ran forward, "Finally! Something to kill!"
As each of her teammates had sprung into action doing what they did best, all of Shepard's frustration and anger coalesced into a charging point of fury, once again transformed into the formidable Vanguard. Her battle instincts took over and she became a powerhouse of streaking blue energy, colliding with her first Collector, the force blasting him backward off his feet. With a feral grin, Shepard evaporated his essence with a blast of her shotgun. She quickly tucked in and let rip a couple of blasts from cover while waiting for her biotic energy to recharge. The second she felt the familiar surge, the blue bolt was gone again, crushing her next target into nothingness. Almost oblivious to the rest of her team, Shepard danced across the battlefield, charging and blasting, until she had personally killed over a half dozen of the creatures.

The frequent missions were starting to show in her battle prowess. She was no longer winded by the prolonged conflict and could just flow on instinct; she had rediscovered her battle rhythm. As they cleared the field to emerge out the other side, Shepard noticed a large defensive cannon that was not firing and wondered why the colonial defenses had not been activated. She answered her own question almost immediately. *Because it's the Collectors and the damn swarms paralyzed them before anyone turned the damn things on! Need to find the controls...*

A quick glance around her squad told her no one was injured, so they pressed on. She heard Joker attempting to establish contact, but the communication was extremely broken; the Collectors had started their jamming. If they didn't hurry, Horizon would be the next colony that went dark and vanished from the Terminus. As they moved into the next section of buildings, Grunt roared and jumped forward, catching more Collectors in his sights. Shepard went wide to complete a flanking maneuver and clear the buildings that ran parallel to their intended path. As she entered the first building, she quickly blasted three through the window. With assistance from Mordin and Miranda they went down quickly. Shepard heard a noise to her side, and as she spun, she saw a husk rapidly approaching. As she blasted one, another came in the far end and she waited to take it down as well. She then rolled back to the window and saw Miranda go by, unaware of two Collectors hidden behind some crates who would now be able to attack her from behind. Shepard shouted out, "Miranda! On your six!" as she called her charge and smashed into them before they could surprise her teammate. As she finished off the first with her shotgun, Miranda spun and warped the second out of existence, shouting a thank you to the commander.

Grunt had waded into a pocket of husks, and was gleefully ripping them to shreds using nothing but his hands and a huge blade mounted to the front of his shotgun. When Miranda saw it, Shepard thought for sure she was going to puke right then and there, so she clapped the XO on her shoulder hard, to distract her, and uttered, "Just be glad he's on our side." Miranda mutely nodded her head and looked away, moving on. Shepard made a comment, "Those things look like the husks the Geth used on Eden Prime..."

Miranda agreed and added, "The Geth got that technology from Sovereign." Mordin had caught up at that point and was collecting data from the dead husk. "Illusive Man was right. Collectors working with Reapers." While Mordin was looking at the husk, Shepard was more interested in Collectors. She scanned any she found that hadn't been obliterated by her team's powerful attacks.

Shepard realized they were moving faster than the Collectors when they emerged into the next courtyard. Still no colonists, but stasis pods were scattered about that hadn't been collected yet. Miranda was making some comment about Freedom's Progress, but she didn't finish before Shepard caught sight of another Collector and disappeared in a blue flash. The rest of the team scrambled to catch up, and Grunt was disappointed because Shepard got the jump on him that time and he didn't get to make first contact. He vowed to himself to make up for it and charged forward with a roar, looking for something to kill. Shepard was very glad he did, because after she charged she realized the Collector was not alone. There was an entire workforce there collecting the pods they had seen, and suddenly the team was in the thick of it. A Krogan was a very good friend to have in close-
quarters combat, and Grunt made quick work of the masses. The fight seemed over, but Shepard could still hear the chatter of a Collector. Everyone else heard it as well and progressed carefully, trying to spy it out.

As they cruised around the next corner, they found the source of the noise. There were three more Collectors... and the first evidence of colonists. Mordin and Miranda examined them. Mordin finally commented, "Victim appears conscious. Fully aware. Trapped in stasis. Fascinating."

Shepard was livid. "There's nothing fascinating about this! They're fucking awake and totally unable to defend themselves. It's got to be terrifying!"

The shock on Mordin's face showed he was sincere as he spoke, "Yes. You are correct. I apologize."

Shepard looked at the colonists, "I don't know if you can hear me, but you'll be ok. We're not going to let them take you. We can't help you right now, but we'll be back for you. I promise."

Shepard growled, "Alright, let's move. We've got some damn Collectors to kill!" As they rolled into the next section, Shepard grabbed up a Collector weapon.

Mordin glanced at it quickly. "Interesting. Seems to be a particle beam weapon of some kind. Extremely powerful." After grabbing the weapon, the team moved on and soon enough more Collectors dropped out of the sky onto their position.

Shepard saw something strange happening to one of the Collectors and shouted out to her team. "The glowing Collector! Saw that when Sovereign possessed Saren! We've got a Reaper here! Kill the damn thing!" Miranda gasped in horror as she threw a warp, and Grunt bellowed with glee as he rumbled forward into the fray. With the team forewarned, the possessed Collector didn't last long, and the rest perished through what was developing into the team's standard battle tactics; Shepard playing pinball, using the Collectors as bumpers, Mordin incinerating as fast as he could target, Miranda warping to cover Shepard's six, and Grunt running amok like a rampaging bull, breaking in half anything that crossed his path. They progressed forward, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake.

Their path forward came to an abrupt halt when they hit a locked door. Shepard managed to bypass the security lock with relative ease, and they quickly found themselves in a secure storage area. They started to walk through and Shepard's Cerberus augmented hearing picked up a slight scuffing noise behind some crates. "Company," was all she said, and the team readied weapons. "Get out here. Now!"

A colonist stepped out from behind the wall of crates, surprised at his visitors. "You're... you're human! What are you doing? You'll lead them right here!"

Shepard looked at him with disdain. "You had to hear them trying to get in... you can't hide from the Collectors. But don't worry; they won't be bothering you anymore."

The guy's eyes got wide, "You mean the Collectors are real? I thought they were made up... propaganda to keep us in Alliance space! No! They got Lilith. They got damn near everybody! You've got to stop them!"

"That's the plan; we could use your help." Shepard was hoping he knew something about why the guns weren't functioning.

"It's the Alliance's fault! They sent that Lieutenant Williams here to build those defense towers. They made us a target!" The colonist was swinging back and forth between anger and borderline panic.
Shepard yelled, "Hey!" and then continued in a normal tone. "Calm down. The Collector's have been hoping from colony to colony; the towers had nothing to do with the attack. If they were working, it might have prevented it! We need to get them fired up. How do we do it?"

"They have power... lots of it. They're GARDIAN lasers, but the targeting systems won't come online. The Alliance gave us pieces of crap that won't shoot straight!" The colonist was obviously disgusted by the Alliance's interference at the colony.

Miranda spoke up, "We can figure out the targeting system... just tell us where to find it."

The colonist was happy to send them on their way, "Head for the main transmitter on the far side of the colony. Pretty hard to miss. The targeting controls are at the base."

"Good enough. Let us outta here and secure the door again behind us. You'll know soon enough if we are successful or not."

As he opened the door and sent them on their way, they heard him speak one last time. "Good luck. I think you're gonna need it."

Grunt answered. "We don't need luck. We have ammo!"

As they emerged, they entered a courtyard with scattered pods and more Collectors. The team had pretty good cover, so utilized it to take down the few exposed enemies they saw. Then, some strange creature none of them had seen yet emerged from one of the buildings, a Scion. It was a huge bipedal with a bulbous head, and it threw out a powerful directional shockwave with cryo effects. Shepard quickly found out it was devastating to shields. At the same time as her getting blasted by the cryo-wave, a possessed Collector also appeared beside it. Grunt bellowed and charged toward them for daring to assault his Battlemaster.

It was the toughest fight yet, but it made sense because they were closing in on the defense cannon controls and the Collector ship, so they expected to meet increased resistance. The addition of the Scions certainly made things more exciting, and Shepard wondered what other new horrors they would be introduced to before this battle finished. They collected more data from the Collector corpses and moved on, continuing to pick up thermal clips and anything else of value as they moved. They bypassed one more door, and found themselves in a large courtyard. Before them stood their target... the colony's main transmitter tower. Shepard made a beeline for the controls at the base, but she pulled herself up short as a pair of Scions emerged, accompanied by a host of husks. The Scions made a tactical error; they targeted solely on Shepard, but she was a blue streak, bouncing between husks. Charging and blasting, never staying in place long enough for the Scion cryo-waves to catch her. While they focused on her, the rest of the team focused on the Scions, and they soon went down in a combination of shotgun blasts and fiery blazes from Grunt and Mordin.

Miranda was busy dodging husks and trying to keep them off Shepard's six when she disappeared under a surge of husks. Shepard heard her cry out in pain and spun around searching for the source of the sound. She saw the pile and careened in, a violent charge of blue scattering them throughout the courtyard. She knelt at Miranda's side and was relieved when she saw blue eyes flutter open. "Lawson! You with me?"

She was reassured by the cocky response from her XO. Even though Miranda grunted in pain as she sat up, she looked the commander square in the face and griped, "Nothing a dab of medigel won't fix. Bastards have to work harder than that to kill me, Shepard." Samantha laughed as she stood up and offered Miranda a hand.

While Miranda treated her wounds, Shepard called the Normandy requesting assistance on the
defense tower calibrations. "Time to show these things we give as good as we get. Edi... bring the defense towers online!"

Edi responded promptly, "Errors in the calibration software are easily rectified, but it will take time to bring the towers to full power. I recommend a defensive posture. I will be unable to mask the increased generator output."

Mordin looked at Shepard, stating the obvious, "Collectors will respond with force to stop it."

The commander nodded. "Alright then, simple enough. You power up and we hold them off until the big gun shoots their ship down. Let's rock!" The minute Edi started the generator, the Collectors started pouring in... Collector guardians, husks, and a possessed immediately began their assault. Shepard slipped into battle mode, grabbing her shotgun and launching across the compound to smash into her first Collector... then a couple of husks... the familiar charge and blast working its magic. The first wave destroyed, the team scampered quickly to pick up what thermal clips they could before the second wave arrived. Edi announced forty percent power as the first husks of the next wave began to roll in. Shepard kept on the move as more Collectors started dropping in, along with a Possessed. The battle raged, fast and furious, and as the team mopped up the last couple of Collectors of the second wave, Edi announced sixty percent power and the sync up to the Normandy targeting protocols.

The pattern repeated as the team collected thermal clips and got ready for round three. As Shepard was scrambling trying to find clips, she saw a huge shape approaching from the Collector ship. She called out, "We've got a big one inbound! No idea what the hell it is!" The whole courtyard shook as the creature hit the ground. It looked like a mechanized hard-shell beetle, except it was the size of a hovercar and it landed directly behind Miranda, leaving her scrambling for cover. The newest arrival glowed with a purple barrier of some kind, leaving the team to experiment to see what worked against it. Both incinerate and overload seemed to be successful and the team was effectively taking its barrier down when the Praetorian slammed Shepard with a high-yield energy weapon, blasting her backwards. She rolled to cover and swapped her shotgun out for her SMG; no way she would be able to charge the behemoth that now confronted them.

Edi announced full power and that she was taking control of the defense grid. As Mordin blasted the Praetorian with another incinerate to burn off the lasts of its armor protection, the creature slammed to the ground again. Shepard was about to relax, thinking they had eliminated the threat, but quickly realized it was somehow regenerating. Once again it glowed purple and took back to the air. Shepard riddled it with incendiary ammo while Mordin torched it with his incineration tech power. Miranda warped the Praetorian as fast as her powers would regenerate, and Grunt bellowed in rage because he couldn't battle hand-to-hand with a flying enemy. While the Praetorian focused on Shepard, Grunt followed behind, continuously pelting it with his shotgun until he ran out of thermal clips. When the Praetorian finally fell, Shepard breathed a sigh of relief; her shotgun was empty and she only had fourteen rounds left in her SMG. She didn't take time to celebrate, instead she scrambled about to pick up thermal clips in case another wave showed up.

The big guns were firing away at the Collector ship, and suddenly the base of the ship erupted in fire. The engines had lit and the ship was departing the planet. Miranda was frustrated, "They wanted the colonists, and they've got them. They've no reason to stay."

Shepard glared at her. "They didn't get them all. That's a victory. We've proven that if we're ready for them, we can defeat them!"

The guy from the storage area suddenly bolted into the middle of the courtyard. "No! Don't let them get away!"
Shepard just shook her head, "Sorry, there's nothing we can do... they're gone."

He paced back and forth screaming, "Half the colony's in there! Do something."

Shepard was angry and shifted her glare from Miranda to the colonist. "I did my best. You just hid in your damn bunker!"

Miranda had realized Shepard was right and added in, "If it wasn't for Shepard, you'd all be on board that ship."

The guy stopped pacing and turned around, his voice at a more normal volume, "Shepard? Wait. I know that name. Yeah, you're some big Alliance hero."

Shepard's head snapped around and huge smile lit her face when she heard a familiar voice come in from the side. Ashley Williams walked out as she spoke, "Commander Shepard. Captain of the Normandy. The first human Spectre. Savior of the Citadel. You're in the presence of a god, Delan. Back from the dead."

Delan crossed his arms in loathing. "All the good people we lost and you get left behind. Figures. Screw this. I'm done with you Alliance types." He threw his arms up in disgust and stalked off.

Ash walked up to the commander and looked at her warily, "I thought you were dead, Shepard. We all did." She stuck her hand out and the commander grabbed it and pulled Ash in for a hug.

"So did I, Ash. I've been in a coma for two years... just woke up not too long ago. Damn good to see you!" Shepard still had a big smile on her face.

Ashley suddenly got angry, "I would have followed you anywhere, Commander. I thought you were gone... I... you were more than our commander. Why didn't you try to contact me? Why didn't you let me know you were alive?"

"I tried, Ash. I asked Anderson where you were, and he wouldn't tell me. All he'd say was that you were on a classified mission." Ashley took a step back and looked around the squad, noticing the Cerberus emblem on Miranda's uniform.

"Because you're with Cerberus now? I can't believe the reports were right." Ash backed away, shaking her head in disbelief.

Miranda commented, "Reports? So much for security."

Ashley explained, "Alliance Intel said Cerberus could be behind our missing colonies. We got a tip that this one could be the next to get hit. I went to Anderson, but he wouldn't talk. But there were rumors that you weren't dead... and worse, that you were working for the enemy."

"The Alliance abandoned me for dead, Ash. They left me on Alchera along with twenty dead soldiers. Cerberus found me and put me back together. When I woke up, I went to Anderson and the Council; Sparatus wanted my head for treason and the others just wanted me gone, out of Council space and back out into the Terminus. Cerberus is the only organization willing to give me the resources to fight the Collectors, but I'm not working for them. It's my ship, my crew, my mission."

Ash got in Shepard's face, "Your ship? Do you really believe that? Or is it just what Cerberus wants you to think? I wanted to believe that you were alive... I just never expected anything like this. You've turned your back on everything we stood for!"

"That's bullshit, Ash! They turned their backs on me! I went to them, asking for help and they tossed
me out like yesterday's trash. You know me. I'd only do this for the right reason. It's the only way I could find to get into the fight. You saw it yourself... it's the Collectors attacking the colonies, not Cerberus... and they're working for the Reapers!

Ash shook her head as she responded, "I'd like to believe you, Shepard, but I don't trust Cerberus. And it worries me that you do. What did they do to you? What if they're behind it? What if they're the ones working with the Collectors?"

Miranda couldn't stand it; she crossed her arms and commented, "Typical Alliance attitude. So focused on Cerberus that you're blind to the real threat."

Shepard tried to ignore Miranda and kept eye contact with Ashley. "You're letting how you feel about their history get in the way of the facts, Ash. I'm not asking you to trust Cerberus... I'm asking you to trust me."

"How can I trust you, Shepard, when you're working with the enemy? Maybe you feel like you owe Cerberus because they saved you. Doesn't matter. I know where my loyalties lie. I'm an Alliance soldier. It's in my blood. I'm reporting back to the Citadel. I'll let them decide if they believe your story." Ash took another step backward as she finished, preparing to turn and walk away.

Shepard's heart ached at the abandonment of yet another friend. "Ash... talk to Anderson. He'll tell you I was there. He cut off the treason charge because he still believes in me. Just be sure to tell them what you saw here... the Collectors taking the colonists. Not Cerberus... And Ash?... Ash!" She waited until Ashley stopped and looked back at her. "I'm glad you didn't end up on that damn Collector ship. Even if you don't believe in me, I still believe in you. Keep fighting the good fight. You'll find us on the same side in the end. I promise you that."

Ashley actually stopped for a moment and replied, "So long, Commander... and... good luck."

Shepard stared at the ground for a long moment after Ashley disappeared from sight. Finally, she sighed and hit her comm button. "Joker, send the shuttle. I've had enough of this place."

Back on the Normandy, Shepard stepped into the comm room to speak with TIM. He was pleased with the mission results. "Shepard. Good work on Horizon. Hopefully, the Collectors will think twice before attacking another colony."

Shepard was ambivalent, "It was good to finally go toe-to-toe with them, test their strength, but we still lost a lot of colonists."

TIM was encouraged, "They'll be more careful now, but I'm sure we can find another way to lure them in."

Shepard caught something in his phrasing that stabbed ice into her veins. "Another way? Ash said the Alliance got a tip about me in Cerberus... was that you?"

TIM was smug as he answered, "I may have let it slip that you were alive... and with Cerberus."

Shepard growled, "And Horizon? You risked the lives of my friend, my crew, and that entire colony just to lure the Collectors there?"

TIM huffed. "Of course I did, but it doesn't matter. Don't be naive, Shepard. If not Horizon, they would have struck elsewhere. At least this way we gave the colony a chance. I told you I wouldn't sit and wait while the Reapers and Collectors gather strength."
Shepard sighed in resignation, realizing that however much she hated it, he was probably right. "We chased them off once. Find a target, and I'll hit it."

TIM responded quickly. "Our target is set, but we can't reach it yet. It's their homeworld. I'm devoting all resources to finding a way through the Omega-4 Relay. We have to hit them where they live. Your team will need to be strong... as will their resolve. There's no looking back. The same goes for you. Can I assume you've put your past relationships behind you?"

Shepard glared at him. "I'm well focused on my mission. If you set this up just to try to help me find 'closure' then stop. I'll deal with my relationships the way I see fit... if you meddle, it will just piss me off and distract me. My relationships are just that. Mine... and non-negotiable."

TIM was insistent, "Best to leave connections behind and focus on the mission."

Shepard was unwavering. "Let me amend my last statement. Non-negotiable and private. That means not up for discussion."

TIM narrowed his eyes in anger, not used to being told no. "Shepard, once we find a way through to the Collector homeworld, there's no guarantee you'll return. To have any hope of surviving, you and your entire team must be fully committed to this."

Shepard's voice went completely flat with her response. "You're a stubborn son of a bitch, so let me make this simple enough for your thick skull to understand. I complete missions; that's why you brought me back, so just fucking let me do my job the way I see fit and leave my personal relationships out of it. You find a way through the relay; I'll make sure the mission gets done. But make no mistake. If it's at all possible, I plan on bringing folks home when we're finished." She didn't give him a chance to respond again; she turned her back on him and stepped out of the holo generator.

As she exited, she realized Jacob was standing there... and he was chuckling. "That's gonna really piss him off. He's used to everyone kowtowing to him."

Shepard was far from being over her anger and it showed through as she responded to Jacob. "The asshole brought me back to be Commander Shepard, not some weak-willed minion. If he can't deal with it, that's his problem, not mine."

Jacob's expression became serious. "Guess we're really gonna do it. Hit the Omega-4 Relay; take the fight to the Collectors in person."

Shepard stopped and took a cleansing breath. "Yes, that's the plan."

Jacob seemed ok with the whole idea, "Looking forward to the action. You really think we're gonna come home?"

Shepard looked him in the eyes as she reiterated, "Yes, that's the plan."

He searched her face for a moment, then nodded and walked away, apparently content with whatever he saw there.

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Shepard decided to walk around the ship a bit and cool off after her conversation with the Illusive Man. She stuck her head in Miranda's door first to give her a heads up, and quickly figured out she was too late. The door slid closed behind her and Miranda stood up, her face red. "Commander. Do you purposely go out of your way to make my job difficult?"
Shepard had the sense to look embarrassed. "Sorry, Miranda... I was actually here to warn you, but I guess you already heard about my 'discussion' with TIM."

Miranda was clearly frustrated. "He brought you back, Shepard! He's paying the expenses on this entire mission! What were you thinking?"

Shepard was done being apologetic, and raised her voice, "I'm thinking I'm doing what he's paying for! You brought me back to be Commander Shepard. Well guess what? This is me! My personal relationships are a part of me, and they're an important part. I'm not a damn robot. I need motivation just like anyone else. I don't do this to be a hero, to get accolades and parades. I don't do it to save the galaxy, and I certainly will NEVER do it to gain praise from your damned egocentric Illusive Man!"

By now, Shepard was shouting, so she swallowed hard and took a deep breath; her voice turned to a deadly quiet calm as her eyes stabbed into Miranda, "I do it to protect the people I love. And if Cerberus cuts me off from everyone from my past... there won't be anyone I care enough about to protect. Think on that, Ms Lawson. Pass THAT little tidbit onto your boss. Maybe you can make him understand I don't give a shit about him or his ideals. I'm doing it to save my loved ones. There is no greater motivation to me. Taking them all away from me would be the last mistake you ever make. And that's not a threat... it's a promise."

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Shepard stormed out and headed directly to the cockpit. As soon as she walked in, Joker started talking, "Hey, Commander, loving how the crew is shaping up! We got Garrus back! That's great, because he was totally my favorite... with that pole up his ass. And Grunt? He's not Wrex, but I'm sure we'll fill our head butting quota..." Joker tapered off when he saw the look on the commander's face. "Uhm... did you need something, Shepard, or are you here to kill me?"

As Shepard's gaze snapped over and locked onto Joker's face, she closed her eyes and answered. "Illium, Joker. Yesterday."

Joker was immediately slamming the coordinates into the system, but had to ask the question. "Commander? Nothing's happened to Liara, has it? Please say no. I really like her..." He finished inputting the information and turned back to Shepard.

She sighed and responded. "No...I ... I just need to see her, Jeff. Yesterday."
Reconciliation

Shepard had been nervous all morning, but finally the moment of truth had arrived. They were on Illium in the dry-docks, and the upgrades on the armor had been started. The docking fees had been paid by Dr Liara T'Soni, and Shepard was on her way to visit the information broker in her office, with Kasumi and Miranda in tow. She had no idea what to expect. On the way, an Asari she did not recognize called her by name. As Shepard approached, the Asari started speaking. "You're Commander Shepard? I saw your... I guess you would say your aura. I'd recognize you anywhere. I was asked to give you a message if I saw you. It's from a friend you made on Noveria."

Shepard shrugged her shoulders, curious as to who it could be from. "What message were you asked to give?"

The Asari stepped forward and her eyes turned white. When she spoke, her voice had taken on a different tone, sounding hollow, almost with an echo. "Shepard. We hide. We burrow. We build. But we know that you seek those who soured the songs of our mothers. When the time comes, our voice will join with yours, and our crescendo will burn the darkness clean. Thank you, Shepard. The Rachni will sing again, because of you."

Shepard was relieved to know the Rachni were keeping their promise. "I'm glad to hear you are rebuilding. Are you somewhere close by?"

The Asari's eyes returned to normal and she stepped back. "The Rachni queen is not here. That message was one of many memories I carry from her. They are an amazing people, Shepard. The galaxy owes you a great debt for giving them a second chance."

Shepard thanked the Asari for delivering the message, and asked her to return a greeting, should she ever see the Rachni queen again. "Just tell her I'm glad my friend from Noveria is doing well, and I will hold her to that promise when the Reapers come."

Shepard continued to Liara's office, her hesitance growing with every step. It seemed fate was willing to help delay her moment of reckoning; she could see the steps leading up to Liara's office when yet another voice called out her name. Gianna Parasini. "Holy crap! Shepard? I thought you were dead." Sighing, Shepard changed direction and walked over to the table Gianna was sitting at, noting the surprised look on the internal affairs investigator's face. "The news said you were dead. What happened? No. Don't tell me. You'd probably have to kill me. Forget I asked."

Shepard laughed, "Good, because it's a long story and I don't have that much time."

Gianna smiled at the Spectre. "Sit down. If I remember, I still owe you a beer." As Shepard sat, the inspector continued, "What brings you to Illium? Ya know, that you can talk about."

Shepard's smile disappeared. "You ever heard of the Collectors? They're attacking human colonies. We're gonna stop them."

Parasini couldn't hide the surprise on her face. "Damn, Shepard. A tough day job for me involves more paperwork and having to spend an extended time in a dress." Parasini was distracted by something happening off to the side, and when she looked back at Shepard, she started to get up. "Hey, listen, I just remembered something. I've gotta go. Talk to you later? And don't forget to drink your beer."

Shepard looked down at the drink and had to laugh. Talk about old school...there was actually a
hand-written note on the napkin under the glass. Parasini was on the job and needed Shepard and her team to sweet talk a merchant into showing her elicit goods. It was easy enough to do, especially since they actually were on the prowl for improved gear for their mission. The team walked up to the mark and Shepard simply told the truth. "I'm outfitting a team for a dangerous mission. I'm looking for the best and willing to pay for it, as long as you work with me."

The store clerk was happy to comply. "Certainly! I'll give you a volume discount rate at the kiosk, and I can let you know when we get any special items in."

Shepard looked intrigued. "What kind of special items we talking about?"

The clerk glanced around nervously before answering, "Oh, you know, schematics, designs. Nothing illegal, but I may not have all the licenses to sell them."

Shepard pressed her, "You have anything else? Anything not listed on your main merchandise kiosk?"

The clerk looked around again and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Well, there is one thing...very advanced design, not publicly available yet..."

She didn't get to finish the sales pitch because Parasini walked up and finished for her. "That's because it's still in development on Noveria, and illegal for export. Hello, Hermia."

The clerk leaned toward Gianna. "Parasini! You set me up! But this isn't Noveria. You don't have the authority to arrest me!"

Gianna laughed, "I don't care if you go to jail. I've got all the evidence I need to fine you out of business."

The clerk, Hermia, ran off, stuttering something about needing to contact her lawyer. Parasini shouted after her, "Talk fast, Hermia! When the fines hit, you won't be able to afford him." She turned back to Shepard with an incredibly smug look on her face. "Ahhhh, that was good. I love nailing Asari, so ageless and superior. Then you get them and they squeal like school girls."

Shepard laughed and issued a joking warning. "Careful, Gianna. My bondmate is Asari and she works here on Illium. You don't want her hearing you; she might sic her pet Spectre on you."

Gianna's face lit up with worry. "I hope you're joking, Shepard!"

Talking about Liara as her bondmate suddenly made Shepard feel the need to finish what she came here to do. "Only about her siccing me on you. I was actually on my way to see her when you called to me."

Gianna looked... disappointed. "Well, then. Guess I should let you go. I've gotta go file a few papers, anyway. Hermia is going to be a very poor woman, very shortly. Maybe another time, Shepard."

With that, Parasini got up and beat a hasty retreat, letting Shepard finally climb the steps to Liara's office.

On the way, Kasumi grinned as she spoke, "You do realize that woman has the serious hots for you, right Shepard?" Shepard denied the allegations, totally clueless, while Kasumi enjoyed herself to no end with merciless teasing.

Miranda was silently fuming after she heard the comment about Liara being Shepard's bondmate. Bondmate! I knew they were close, but I don't remember any of the profiles mentioning that! Damn it! I need to review them all and see what else I may have missed. Irritated, Miranda cut off the
jesting with a quick comment. "I hardly see how this discussion is relevant to the mission."

Kasumi and Shepard glanced at each other, rolling their eyes in disbelief. Kasumi couldn't help but comment, "Don't be such a tight-ass, Miranda. You're gonna blow a gasket." Miranda was ready to make a scathing retort when a glare at both of them from the commander stopped the fledgling feud before it built up any steam.

As the trio reached the door, Liara's assistant stood to welcome them, saying the information broker was expecting the commander and would be very pleased with her arrival, then promptly showed Shepard into the office. As Shepard entered, Liara was finishing up a business call and the words she spoke sent shivers down the commander's spine. Sam had heard those words before, on the day they were forced to kill Matriarch Benezia. Liara spoke to the client, "Have you faced an Asari commando unit before? Few humans have. I'll make it simple. Either you pay me, or I flay you alive. With my mind."

Liara felt a presence behind her and glanced over her shoulder to see who it was. Instant recognition made her call out and spin to meet her guest. "Shepard! Nyxeris, hold my calls."

Liara immediately closed the distance and took Shepard's hands in hers, feeling the familiar energy jump between them the minute their fingertips brushed. Pure instinct drove her to lean in and kiss Samantha before she realized other people had come in with the commander. Liara immediately recognized Miranda Lawson and her blood ran cold. She broke off the kiss, stepped back behind her desk and sat down, her angst overriding the joy of reunion. Even more nervous now, puzzled by Liara's behavior, Shepard took a seat in front of the desk and started talking. "Liara. It's... great to see you."

Liara's eyes told Shepard much more than her words. Liara could tell Shepard was unsure, confused by her reaction. Why did that Cerberus bitch have to come with her? How am I supposed to talk to her when neither of us trusts Cerberus? Since Liara had no answers, she went along with the general platitudes, "It is very good to see you as well... Shepard. I'm glad you made it. I assume the docking fees were all taken care of? I left instructions that everything should be charged to my brokerage."

Even as Liara spoke, Shepard could see the anger in her eyes, but could tell it was directed over her shoulder at Miranda Lawson. Goddamn it! That's why she shut down. This is going to be just like Ashley. I'm fucking working with Cerberus and no one will trust me...not even my bondmate!

Shepard went with the flow of the conversation, hoping Liara would open up eventually. She needed to create an opportunity where she could get Liara alone; to try and explain. "Yes, everything was paid, and our dry-dock was ready and waiting when we arrived. Now, I believe you mentioned you had things you had to take care of. Which of those tasks are assigned to me as my part of our... agreement?" Shepard knew they had no such understanding, but hoped Liara wouldn't shut down the off-hand request for additional visits.

Liara only pondered a moment before she came up with something, obviously acquiescing to Shepard's proposal. "I need someone with hacking expertise, someone I can trust... like you. If you could disable security at key points around Illium, you could get me information I need."

Liara saw Samantha's relief in the way her face relaxed when Liara accepted the commander's assistance. Shepard had a gentle smile on her face as she replied, "I'll do whatever you need me to do, Doctor. In exchange, I'd like whatever information you have on a Justicar Samara and on an assassin named Thane Krios. We have reason to believe they are here on Illium."

Liara gave Shepard instruction on where the terminals were and how to get the data she needed. She ended with "Thank you, Shepard. This may help me pay a great debt. I'll try to have the information
you need by the time you return."

Hacking a few terminals didn’t really provide much of a challenge, so Shepard would have been able to return to Liara relatively quickly. Instead, she took a break and hit the bar, hoping to soothe her anger and calm her nerves a bit before returning to the broker’s office. As she rolled up to the counter, the bartender introduced herself. "Welcome to Eternity, I'm Aethyta, Asari Matriarch and bartender."

Shepard was curious and just had to ask, "You're a Matriarch? I thought they served as honored advisors. What are you doing tending bar?"

Aethyta laughed, "I know, not what you'd expect, but nobody on Thessia wanted to listen to my wise counsel, so here I am offering advice to my patrons. I'm appreciated more here. So what brings you to Illium?"

Aethyta couldn't believe her luck; Commander Shepard just sat her ass down on a stool and felt like talking. She just might get some information yet.

The commander just shrugged, "Ahhh. Gearing up for a mission, picking up a couple of recruits, buying some upgrades, and the ship is in dry-dock getting some armor mods. Routine stuff for a spacer like me. So, tell me, what's it like to live for a thousand years?"

Aethyta paced back and forth as she answered. "Violent. Wars break out. Sometimes you get good news like that colony on Feros surviving. That's the exception though; generally, colonies get destroyed, like Eden Prime. Now I hear about more shit going on in the Terminus and nobody's doing a damn thing about it. And I tried to warn 'em! Told people on Thessia what was comin' and they didn't wanna hear it."

"Didn't want to hear what?" Sam couldn't help herself, and the question was out of mouth before she knew it.

"That art and philosophy and political prowess wasn't gonna cut it! We can't go a single Asari lifetime without some big war breaking out. We need to get our daughters working earlier, not spending their wild maiden years shaking their ass at some strip joint or working with merc bands. I know something's still coming. It's not the last we'll see of the like of Saren."

"So you end up tending bar because you got in a pissing match with the other Matriarchs?" Sam wasn't really expecting a response; she was just making an observation, but the Matriarch got defensive.

"Better than what the rest of 'em are doing! Look at that screw up with Saren and the Geth a few years back! Their ships were hangin' bare-assed in space when Saren started shooting. If not for you Humans, we woulda bought it right there." Aethyta was very animated; Sam loved her passion as she continued her diatribe. "So what mission you gearing up for? Going after the pirates raiding the colonies?"

Aethyta saw that any relaxation and enjoyment Sam had gotten out of her drink vanished in an instant and knew she had guessed right as Shepard groused, "Yeah... something like that."

Aethyta narrowed her eyes and leaned over the bar, staring at Shepard's face. "Now don't be gettin' all somber on me. You look like you're pretty capable of kicking some serious ass. You build up that crew of yours and go take back what's yours. The council is selling the Humans short, considering you literally saved their asses only a couple years ago. They got a short memory; they should be helping, Terminus or not. Don't you let anybody tell you different."
Shepard laughed. "I like you, Matriarch. Thanks for the pep talk."

Aethyta smiled, "That's what I'm here for, Babe!"

Shepard smiled in return and got up from her stool. "Well, thanks for the drink but I got places to go and people to see. Take care, Aethyta. Might see you around."

Shepard waved as she headed off, aiming for Liara's office. When she arrived, Liara was pleased. "Thank you, Shepard. The data you found was extremely helpful. It gave me a target. There is a spy here, known only as the Observer, and they have infiltrated my network. I've been working to ferret them out, and between what you got and the leads Nyxeris has dug up, I've narrowed the suspects down to five. Taking down the Observer will get me much closer to my goal. I could use your help."

Shepard leaned forward in her chair. "Just tell me what I need to do, Liara."

"Your data pointed me to some logs kept by various information agents. The logs were deleted, but it may be possible to reconstruct some of them. If you can do that, we might get enough information to pinpoint the target and strike. It will go a long way to making my network secure again."

Shepard stood up. "I'm on it, Liara. I'll get the data and let you know what I find. The five data points will be easy; the tough part will be reconstituting enough of the data to make it worthwhile."

Shepard roamed around the trading floor, collecting the data and then worked on the decryption and reconstruction. Once she was done, she still had nothing solid so she took it to Garrus.

His investigative skills as an ex C-Sec officer proved very useful. It didn't take him long before he laughed and asked Shepard if it was some kind of test. When Shepard gave him a questioning look, he explained. "It's simple. Most of the reconstructed statements are worthless, providing circular reasoning at best. But this one... only this one has something significant. All of the suspects are male, but this specifically refers to the Observer as 'she.' The Observer is a female, so none of these suspects fit the profile." Garrus was particularly smug in his deduction, and all Shepard could do was admit the obvious oversight. She had too much on her mind to properly concentrate. After thanking Garrus, Sam immediately headed back to Liara's office. She was in a hurry to get off the ship and purposely didn't tell anyone she was going; for once no one tagged along as she left the Normandy.

She called Liara while she was on her way, giving her the news and asking who provided the leads. Liara answered promptly, "My assistant, Nyxeris. She got the information. Nyxeris... gave me the information." Samantha could hear the ideas turning in Liara's head and realized what her conclusion was going to be. Liara continued speaking, "Nyxeris. Could I see you in here for a moment? Shepard. I'll talk to you later." Sam broke into a run, headed for the information broker's office as fast as her feet and the crowds on Illium would allow. Considering Nyxeris was just outside Liara's door, Sam was too far away, barely off the Normandy, and in her gut she felt the trip took too long.

As Sam topped the steps, Nyxeris was nowhere to be seen and all was quiet. Samantha drew her shotgun and charged into Liara's office, only to see Liara standing victorious over a very recently deceased assistant. Shepard ran to her, asking if she was alright. Liara was still tingling with biotics, but unharmed, and responded calmly. "She was very talented. I imagine that had she been ordered to assassinate me, I never would have seen her coming. But her barriers needed practice. Practice I'm afraid she won't be getting." Liara proceeded to make some calls, arranging for a cleaning crew and various other tasks that resulted from the 'accident' in her office.

Shepard moved to one of Liara's side terminals, away from the main desk, to let Liara work. As she looked up the information Liara had found on Krios and the Justicar to make herself look busy, she also watched Liara. The Asari was very focused and acted surprisingly calm as the crew came in and removed any evidence of the altercation that had happened such a short time ago. As Shepard looked
on, it finally sunk in how much Liara had changed; she was definitely more cold and detached. The two years had been hard on her. Her mom was right; Liara had lost a part of her soul and it broke Shepard's heart to see. She felt she had to do something or Liara would be lost to her forever.

Shepard got up slowly and approached the desk, laying a hand on her bondmate's shoulder. "Liara. We need to talk."

Liara stood and stepped away, her guilt crushing, her mind frozen in fear. "I am not ready to discuss this! I...I don't know what to say or how to say it! By the Goddess, I practically just killed Nyxeris in front of her, but for a matter of just a few moments!"

"Liara." Shepard's voice was pleading, her heart breaking. "I'll shout if from the roof tops if it's not blatantly obvious that I love you, and it's killing me that you're being so distant." Getting no reaction, Shepard hesitated slightly before continuing, her voice breaking as she finished, "There hasn't been anything we couldn't share, for a long time now. Why can't you just talk to me?"

Liara wouldn't even look at her; she faced the window as she spoke. "I... I can't, Shepard. Not here. Not now. As I told you before, I have debts to repay, things I must finish. I'm sorry, but I can't say anything else right now."

"You know, my mom told me you were scared. She actually said you'd lost a part of your soul when you lost me. Well, I'm no longer lost, and I'm here to give it back to you...if you'll take it." Sam stood there with a dazed look in her eyes, questioning why she was getting absolutely no response from her supposed bondmate, trying to make some sense of it. Shepard was barely able to choke out her next sentence. "Do you not love me anymore?"

Liara was panicked, having no idea how to explain everything to Samantha and not have her hate her, completely paralysed by her fear. She opened her mouth to talk... to say something to explain herself to her bondmate... and was totally unable to force any air across her vocal chords to utter a single sound, closing her mouth again in frustration as her eyes heated with impending tears.

After what seemed like another incredibly long silence to Shepard, Dr Liara T'Soni witnessed something she never thought she'd see; the great Commander Shepard, pillar of strength, savior of the galaxy... broke. Samantha whispered so quietly Liara almost didn't hear it. "Mom said you still loved me..." As her entire world crashed down, Samantha Shepard's chin sunk to her chest and she leaned against Liara's desk for the support necessary to stay on her feet, as tears started to run down her face. Liara watched, frozen and unable to comprehend how any of this was possible. "Samantha does not... just... break. She is too strong!" Liara listened in horror as a voice came out of Sam's mouth that did not belong to her. Never had Shepard's voice ever sounded so timid... so... defeated.

"You asked me to understand. I've been gone two years and I think I just now figured out what you meant. It's all true, isn't it? I refused to believe the Illusive Man when he told me about the crew, but it's all true. Ashley thinks I'm lying about the last two years and hates me for working with Cerberus. Tali's 'too busy' with her own project to be bothered to help me." Samantha let out a short mirthless laugh that drove a dagger into Liara's heart. "She didn't even trust me enough to tell me what the project was. And Garrus; he's with me, but won't tell me why he ended up on Omega shooting mercs. Seems he doesn't fully trust me anymore, either." Shepard paused and raggedly sucked in a lungful of air like she was trying to keep from drowning.

"But you... of all people. You haven't once spoken my first name and you can't seem to say three little words... I never thought you would desert me." Shepard pushed off the desk and rocked back onto her feet, staggering a bit as she struggled to find her balance, shoulders slumped. She took a step toward Liara and started to raise her hand, as if to caress the Asari's face one last time, then thought better of it and dropped her arm back to her side, turning away and walking toward the door. "I
never thought..." She hesitated, and then a pained laugh escaped Shepard's lips. "I'm such a fool. All Commander Shepard is to anyone is a means to an end. I think the only one who has any integrity left is Garrus. At least he had the fortitude to walk away when you started to work for the Shadow Broker."

That statement was like a cold slap across her face and it shocked Liara out of her paralysis. She gasped and spun from the window as she finally found her voice. "What? Is that what they told you, Shepard? I would never!"

Shepard turned to face the Asari and her face shifted from misery to anger, her voice like steel. "Why should I believe that, Liara? The Illusive Man told me about Garrus leaving you because he could no longer work for you when you changed allegiances. And here you are, a sudden skyrocketing success... the most respected info broker on Illium. You haven't told me anything different; you won't talk to me, you won't explain. You were happy to use me to hack terminals, gather information, ferret out a spy... the only thing that surprises me is that you killed her yourself and didn't wait and have me do your dirty work! Because that's what I'm good at, isn't it? Killing? Hey, look! There's a rogue Spectre... that's ok, Commander Shepard will kill him. Hey look, pirates! That's ok, Shepard will kill 'em. Oh my! Geth beyond the Veil! That's ok, Shepard's here, she'll get rid of 'em... Hey, look, a Reaper. That's ok, Commander Shepard and the Normandy are here to kill it..."

Shepard was prepared to go on, but the tortured look on Liara's face as she shouted "Shepard, stop! None of that's true!" gave her pause. Liara covered her face with her hands and cried, "Goddess, what have I done?"

Shepard glared at her with a malice Liara had never seen on Sam's face before, her eyes dark with resentment. "What you've done, Liara, is destroyed the best thing that ever happened to me. I loved you. We were bondmates!" Sam's chest hurt, like her heart was threatening to stop beating at the thought of losing that special union. "I don't know what happened to you in the last two years. I was gone. I get it, believe me. I. Get. It. I was comatose and the whole fucking galaxy moved on without me. The only thing that kept me going after I woke up in that damn Cerberus lab was thinking of you. Whether I want to or not, I still love you, Liara, but apparently that doesn't matter anymore."

Another mirthless laugh drove the dagger yet deeper. "But that's ok, because yet again Commander Shepard has something new to kill, Collectors. Maybe I'll survive this and maybe I won't... and maybe it'll be better if I don't. At least when I die, your two years spent getting over me won't have been wasted time." As she turned on her heal to leave, Shepard's words about dying brought everything sharply together in Liara's mind; her nightmares, Sha'ira's visit and her advice to be brave and let truth find the way to love.

Liara pulled herself from behind the desk and walked quickly toward the commander, finally truly speaking, her fear crushed under her desperation, "Samantha, wait! By the Goddess, I swear I love you still, as much as I ever have, so before you walk out that door I owe you an explanation, at the very least." Shepard stopped and turned, looking at the Asari, but still seething. "You've got two minutes, Doctor. Talk fast."

Liara took a deep breath and began. "Did Cerberus ever tell you how they recovered your body?" Samantha said nothing, just stoically shook her head no, and Liara continued. "The Blue Suns picked you up at Alchera. They had a deal with the Shadow Broker, who in turn was going to sell your corpse to the Collectors. I stole you from the Broker, and then... I... I gave you to Cerberus, Shepard. Because I couldn't give you up and they said they could rebuild you. Garrus left because I worked with Cerberus, because I gave your body to our worst enemy outside the Reapers. Not because I started working with the Shadow Broker! Goddess! You have to believe I would never work with the Broker... not after what he tried to do! I'm not working for the Shadow Broker; with every ounce of energy and every resource I command, I am hunting him!"
Shepard's angry gaze softened almost imperceptibly, asking "Was that so damned hard, Liara? Why couldn't you tell me this before now?"

Liara stared at the floor as she continued quietly. "Because of so many reasons, Shepard. Guilt. Shame. Fear. You have no idea the things I did just to find you to begin with. You say you have killed... so have I, Shepard. After two years, I am not the person you fell in love with any more. That person no longer exists. You have no idea the depths to which I sunk to find you and get you back. The people I killed, just to turn you over to Cerberus and turn you into something I knew you would hate. I had convinced myself there was no way you would love me anymore once you knew the things I had done, so I attempted to close my heart to you, thinking it would be easier... but it has been anything but easy."

Shepard was calmer, but still angry. "You think you're different than you were two years ago? I fucking died, Liara. I wake up every morning wondering if I'm the same person, how it's even possible that I'm alive and not some glorified AI. Yet I have to believe I'm still me or I'd go crazy; I don't have a choice. I still love my mom. I still love you. Just everyone else seems to hate ME now, because I had the audacity to up and die on them." Shepard let out a frustrated laugh. "Well, I'm sorry. Trust me, do everything you can to avoid dying because it hurts like hell, and if you can't avoid it, then don't try to come back, because believe it or not, the emotional torture of everyone doubting you somehow hurts even worse."

Liara looked up at Shepard and the long threatening tears finally crept out of the Asari's eyes, no matter how hard she tried to contain them. "When I took your body from the Broker, I messed up. I had help... a Drell named Feron. I screwed up and I barely escaped with my own life, and the Broker took Feron. While I have spent the last two years waiting to see if all I had done was worth it, waiting to see if Cerberus could actually bring you back, I've also been trying to find him. You're back now, but Feron is still lost. I don't even know if he's alive, but he helped me save you. I have to find him; I owe him at least that much."

The one thing that Shepard could never stand was to see Liara cry and that innate reaction still held true. Watching the tears tumble down the Asari's face broke the commander's resolve and her expression softened as she spoke. "Liara. Do you love him?"

Confusion reigned on Liara's face. "What? Love who?"

The pain in Shepard's face spoke volumes, though her words were short. "The Drell. This... Feron."

"What?" Shock replaced the confusion as it dawned on her, what Shepard must think. "Oh Goddess, no! Shepard! I could never love anyone but you!"

Shepard's heart jump-started hearing that statement, but questions still needed to be answered. "Then honestly, why couldn't you tell me? Do you not remember my pledge to you? Did you not believe me when I told you, whatever your choices and wherever your path may take you?"

Tears continued to fall as Liara stared at the floor. "I remember, Shepard, but those promises were made in a much more innocent time. After all we had done...after all of the Cerberus evil we had witnessed; I still gave you to them for the chance that you could live, knowing they would try to turn you to their own purposes. And I let it happen, because I couldn't let you go. I am so sorry if that betrayal hurts you, but under the same circumstances, I would risk it again. So if you leave, angry and hurt, I won't blame you, but I want you leaving for honest reasons, not because of some lies you've been fed by the Illusive Man!" Her head came up with the shift in emotion to anger at Cerberus. She looked pleadingly to Shepard for understanding.

"Liara, a pledge is a forever thing, no matter when it's made." Shepard took another couple of steps
closer to Liara and spoke softly. "I don't know what to believe anymore, but if all you've said is true then you did the right thing, Liara. You have no reason to be sorry. If you hadn't given me to Cerberus I wouldn't be standing here now. Instead, I'd be dead, and either buried or a corpse in the hands of the Collectors. Personally, I'd rather be standing here; Cerberus or not."

Liara hung her head and whispered, "Thank you, Samantha. I never... My biggest fear was that you'd hate me."

Samantha spoke nervously as she closed the distance between them until they were a hand-width apart, not touching, but with her breath feathering softly against Liara's cheek. "You say you couldn't let me go. If that's true, then trust me like you used to. Believe in me and stop pushing me away. I could never hate you, Blue. I love you... I have since I met you and I always will. As far as I'm concerned you are still my bondmate. Is there still a future for us, Blue? It's your move, your choice; I can't force you to have faith in us. Last chance before I turn and walk out that door forever."

Samantha fell silent and held her breath, trembling and afraid, unsure of what the next few seconds would bring; hopeful because Liara had not retreated.

Liara's breath hitched when she heard the velvety soft murmur of the familiar pet name. She whispered, "By the Goddess! I'm such an idiot. What I almost threw away out of fear..." She leaned into Shepard and wrapped her arms around the woman she loved so deeply, closed her eyes and pressed their cheeks together, reveling in the warmth that spread through her body as Samantha exhaled softly and returned her embrace. Time meant nothing as they stood there wrapped in each other's arms, just being together. Shepard eventually pulled back a bit and brushed her lips across Liara's cheek, the Asari's lips catching hers as she turned to meet the kiss. Just like when Samantha walked into her office for the first time, Liara's passion flamed, only this time nothing happened to cause her to break away. This time, she kissed Samantha for all she was worth, one hand rising to entangle in her hair, her arm around Samantha's waist drawing their bodies as tightly together as her strength allowed. Before she realized, her eyes went black and she longingly probed for the familiar connection with Samantha. Suddenly realizing she did so without asking, she started to pull back, saying, "Oh, Goddess! I'm sorry..." Samantha cut her off, not aloud, but with a reaching mind, welcoming Liara back into her psyche. {I've missed you so much, Blue! Welcome home, my love!}

Shepard wasted no time, immediately opening herself to Liara completely, revealing all the confusion when she woke in the Cerberus lab, through the painful reunions with Ashley and Tali, including all the rejection she felt from Liara, the fear she had moved on. Even though she knew it pained the Asari, she held nothing back. She needed Liara to understand the hurt she had caused by not trusting in Samantha's love for her. Liara responded in kind, from the pain she felt at Samantha's death, through the hunt, the nightmares, until the now welcome 'betrayal' by Riana and the resultant visit from Sha'ira that finally gave her the strength to continue on. It was a long, exhausting meld for both of them, reliving and sharing all the pain, but a necessary one. When they finally withdrew, they found themselves seated on the floor leaning together for support, foreheads touching and four hands clasped together in their laps. Samantha looked at Liara and saw beautiful blue eyes, though weary, once more clear and focused. "So what now, dear Blue?"

Liara sighed. "I suppose you go back to your mission, and I continue with mine to find and destroy the Shadow Broker, both for what he tried to do to you and for his work with the Collectors." Liara's voice turned to steel as she finished. "And when I find him, I'll hit him with a biotic field so strong that what's left of his body will fit into a coffee cup."

Shepard stood, pulling Liara up with her as she spoke. "Liara, there is no 'your' mission and 'my' mission any more. There is only 'our' mission." Liara went to interrupt, but didn't get past "Shepard..." before Sam put a hand over her mouth. "If the Broker is helping the Collectors, then I need to help you take him down, to remove any support he may be providing them. You, better than
anyone, know the extent of his network. We can't have the Broker telling the Collectors when and how we're going to attack them, now can we?"

Liara sighed, "How do you always do that? Just step in and take over, and somehow make it seem like the right thing to do?"

Shepard smiled, "Because it is the right thing to do. You may be the information broker, but I am the military strategist. And I'm not taking over, we're equal partners in all we do. You find the information, I'll plan the attack and we'll get it done... together. Use our combined strength, Liara. You know we make a great team."

Liara smiled back tiredly, saying, "Yes, the best." She leaned into Shepard again and hugged her tight, whispering, "Goddess, I missed you so much!" Shepard took a deep breath and released it, along with a huge portion of the tension she'd held since stepping off the Normandy onto Illium.

"Well, Dr T'Soni. Can...uhm... May I have the privilege of walking you home?" Shepard had a mischievous grin on her face.

Liara's eyes narrowed as she looked at Shepard and asked, "Do I detect an ulterior motive in your chivalrous quest, Commander?"

Shepard threw her a look of mock indignation. "But of course not! How can you think such a thing of me?"

Liara laughed, "Because you know perfectly well I have Riana to escort me."

Shepard grumped, "And I'm supposed to trust her? Did you not just recently reveal to me a betrayal on the part of said commando?"

Liara's eyes twinkled in amusement as she responded. "That I did, Commander. Come; let me show you the third of our lovely abodes."

As they stepped out the door and Liara locked up the office, her heart swelled with the realization of how much she had missed their playful banter. As they walked arm-in-arm to the Illium apartment, Riana followed in trail, extra vigilant because she knew 'perfectly well' that the two people in front of her were completely oblivious to the world around them.
Trials and Tribulations

Aethyta had both Tevos and Mozia connected over a vid conference. "Yes, I can vouch for sure that Commander Shepard is alive and well, because she sat her ass down at my bar yesterday and we had a damn drink together!"

Tevos came online, "Though I didn't see her in person, I told you that much after she came to the Citadel...Did you actually manage to find anything out from Shepard, or did you two just enjoy a good drunk?"

Aethyta barked out a laugh. "Someone piss on your Thessian rose this morning, or you just mad cuz she didn't come see you while she was in town?" Aethyta waited for a response, but Tevos didn't take the bait, so she continued. "Yes, I got some info. Shepard had a Cerberus watchdog with her; Miranda Lawson... prissy bitch with a stick up her ass. Wasn't fond of Shepard having a liquid lunch. She also had a small Asian Human with her, named Kasumi. She had a good sense of humor, and while I never got a good look at her, I did notice she had what looked remarkably like an Athame stripe. She's an infiltrator if I ever saw one. That girl could disappear by turning sideways if you weren't keeping a close enough eye on her. Not a stitch of Cerberus on her though, and Shepard said she was here recruiting. Smart... I think she's picking up non-Cerberus add-ons for her crew to ensure loyalty if push comes to shove. And Mozia, you need to talk to your captain about maybe asking for some volunteers. If they're hiring outside of Cerberus, Shepard could probably use a few trustworthy commandos at her back...especially if she recruits my girl again and she ends up back on the ship with her. I want to make sure they stay safe."

Mozia was curious, "Thyta, if I asked for volunteers, every one of them would put their hand up. They adored Shepard when she was here, and every one of them would follow her to the Void and back. Did she say anything about what she was recruiting for?"

Aethyta shook her head. "Not directly, but I asked her if she was going after the pirates raiding their Terminus colonies and she got real quiet. The mood definitely shifted, and she didn't exactly say yes, but her response was 'yeah, something like that' so I know I hit close to the mark. I doubt it's pirates... I was hoping she'd spill a bit but I got nothing. I'll keep my ear to the ground here; see if I can pick up any rumors."

Aethyta wrapped it up. "That's all I got, though I did try to push her back toward you, Tevos. I told her the Council has a short memory and, with saving your asses only two years ago, you should be more accommodating. Maybe actually help instead of just promising to not get in the way. I'm no politician, but it's a thought."

As soon as they entered the apartment, Shepard stopped and looked around, taking it all in. "Well, Dr T'Soni. Nice place you've got here."

Liara pushed her playfully with her shoulder. "You know my mother didn't do anything in small measure... and it's not mine, it's ours." She turned to Riana, asking her to fetch a couple of crates, and then turned back to Shepard. "I'd give you a tour, but the place is so wide open you can see everything from here. Feel free to wander while I slip into something a bit more comfortable."

Shepard grinned at the Asari and followed her upstairs to the loft bedroom, slowed to a snail's pace as she crested the top step and let out a low whistle. "Wow. Love the aquarium." Sam had a soft smile on her face, "It will give me pleasant memories when I get back onboard the Normandy."
was changing into lounging clothes, but looked at her quizzically, expecting an explanation. "You'll feel right at home. The captain's quarters on the new Normandy has a big fish tank on one wall. No fish though, because I'm sure I'd get busy and forget to feed them. No sense in torturing them."

Liara walked over to her and gently trailed her fingertips across Sam's cheek. "You know, we're pretty much the same size. I can loan you some clothes if you want to get more comfortable." They smiled at each other; Shepard easily recognized the reference back to a particular night when they were still struggling with the boundaries of their relationship.

Shepard laughed gently, her eyes darkening suggestively. "I can drop my armor easy enough...and I'd be happy to accept anything you have to offer...you know, to help keep me warm."

Liara blushed and looked away. "Later, Commander... after I release Riana for the night." She glanced back, just catching Shepard out of the corner of her eye before being swept up into an embrace by her lover. Her eyes sparkling, Liara broke away, laughing at her mate. She then stepped back in, smacking away Shepard's attempts to renew full-body contact, and started undoing the armor catches. "Off. This isn't the most comfortable thing to hug, you know," Liara chastised. While Sam peeled off her armor, Liara grabbed some clothes for her; when Shepard was ready, she was stunned when Liara handed her a pair of N7 sweats.

It only took her a moment to figure it out and her mood turned somber. "Garrus told me you went to the crash site..."

Painful memories surfaced in her mind and were reflected on Liara's face as she took Shepard's hand. "Come, Samantha. Our time is short and we still have much to discuss."

Liara led Shepard downstairs and poured three glasses of wine, settled onto the couch and began the story. She and Riana told Sam of everything that happened on Alchera. What they found, what they collected, what they didn't find... and all the anguish and anger that resulted in the realization that someone purposely lured the Normandy into a trap. Shepard had seen the basics of this in the meld at the office, but now she had the complete story, including an additional perspective from the huntress.

Liara pointed out the crates that Riana had gone to get, telling Shepard they were the personal belongings the commandos were able to retrieve from the remains of her quarters. She beamed a huge smile at Sam. "You'll be particularly happy with a few things. We managed to salvage a number of your books, and one very special pair of leather riding boots."

Sam's face lit up. "You recovered my hovercycle boots?" Riana burst out laughing at the commander's expression, not quite understanding why anyone would want to ride one of those old, noisy contraptions. Shepard grinned, "Don't knock it 'til you've tried it! There's nothing like feeling that wind in your face and the freedom of not being encased in a hovercar. It's like flying!"

Liara laughed, "I don't care about the hovercycle... I want you back in your boots and jeans... those pants accentuate a certain part of your anatomy... deliciously." Liara blushed as she finished the statement, but Sam's face turned bright red as well, not believing Liara actually said those words aloud and not in a meld.

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by a loud growl coming from Shepard's stomach and Liara was aghast at her poor hostess proficiency. "By the Goddess! I know you! You probably haven't eaten all day! What was I thinking?"

Shepard looked at her sheepishly, actually embarrassed, both at being so predictable and by how loud the growl was. Liara called in an order to one of the local restaurants and sent Riana to fetch it, then moved to the kitchen and dug around to find something to serve as a suitable snack to keep
Shepard from starving to death in the interim. As they sat back down to await Riana's return, Liara was concerned by an odd look on Sam's face and asked her if everything was alright. Shepard shrugged and replied, "Yeah, I guess. It's just weird. I've had to make myself eat since I woke up. I've had no hunger drive at all." She smiled adoringly at Liara. "I think I simply needed you back to really start to feel normal again." Her face suddenly fell and she reached over and wiped away the tears starting to drizzle down Liara's face. "Hey! Blue! What's up?"

Liara gazed at the woman in front of her and whispered, "I've been so wrapped up in my own fears and pursuits, I've not considered how this has impacted you... suddenly waking up and finding everything you knew had changed so much. I've been so selfish, Samantha!"

Her confession brought on a new wave of tears and Samantha slid over and held her bondmate close. "Just let it go, Blue... we're together now and it's in the past. We'll take it one day at a time from here. We'll be alright... we'll be more than alright!"

When Riana arrived with the food, she found the pair still on the couch, throwing pieces of fruit at each other and trying to catch them in their mouths, giggling and laughing at one another. Riana breathed a sigh of relief for her mistress, knowing that at least for now Liara's days of darkness were at an end. They ate with a peaceful sense of camaraderie, and Riana helped them clean up when they were finished, then asked to be dismissed. Liara again looked ashamed. "I'm sorry, Riana. I don't know where my head is today." Riana flashed a knowing grin toward Shepard, but her manners were too good to say anything aloud. Liara, however, caught the look and laughed. "Yes, I suppose you are correct. I know exactly where my head has been. But I am still sorry. You didn't even have to stay and eat with us, though your fellowship and company is always appreciated. Feel free to enjoy the rest of your evening as you wish."

Riana bowed her head to both of them. "Thank you, Mistress. And it is wonderful to see you again, Shepard. I thanked the Goddess for your return to us. Enjoy your slumber; it is my honor to keep you safe in this house tonight."

Shepard blushed at the words and her throat constricted with a rush of emotion. Unable to make herself talk, she gave the surprised huntress a hug of thanks, then pushed her toward her room, finally croaking out in a husky voice, "Thank you, Riana. We'll see you in the morning."

As Riana smiled and retreated to her room, Liara ran her hand lovingly down Shepard's arm. "They all love and respect you, you know. Between your reputation and then actually meeting you on Thessia, you made quite the impression on them. They will all be happy to get news of your return."

Taking her hand gently, Liara led Shepard upstairs and made sure she had everything she needed to get ready for bed, and then completed her own evening routine. She finally sat on the edge of the bed and did a final check on the brokerage accounts for last minute emergencies, double-checked that all the apartment shades were drawn, and ensured the security system was enabled. She then sent a quick message to Judea, asking if she would be interested in assisting the Commander for a couple of days. The commando was apparently still awake, because Liara received an instant response. All it said was "When and where?" Liara typed back to join them for breakfast at 0800 hrs. She removed her omnitool and set it on her nightstand, then prepared to ask Shepard if she was still interested in any of her ulterior motives for walking her home. "So, Commander..." Her words died on her lips as she turned, realizing the great Commander Shepard was sound asleep. Liara looked at her tenderly and gently swept the hair off her face, still reveling in the fact that Samantha was actually here. Two long years of prayers were finally answered and she actually had her bondmate back in her life.

She propped herself up on one elbow and stretched out next to her lover, soothingly caressing her, running her fingertips around her face and then gently across her chest, the physical contact
providing confirmation that Sam was real. Liara couldn't help herself; she leaned forward to press a soft kiss against those supple lips, and Samantha stirred awake, sleepy green eyes meeting impish blues. Liara whispered against the mouth she was kissing, her breath tickling Sam's lips. "I didn't mean to wake you, I'm sorry."

Samantha chuckled. "You are still such a bad liar, T'Soni."

Liara smiled in response, "Only to you, my love. I can't find it in my heart to deceive you." Sam's sleepy eyes drifted closed again, but not before she opened her arms and an eager Asari quickly snuggled into a shoulder that still smelled of leather and musk. Goddess how I've missed this! Liara fell asleep listening to the steady beat of Samantha's heart and being gently rocked by the rhythmic rise and fall of her lover's chest. They both slept soundly, neither one plagued by their frequent nightmares.

Miranda was frantic. Shepard was gone; as in nowhere on the Normandy and her omnitool tracker was not functioning, gone. The Illusive Man had grossly misread the situation and now it was up to Miranda to fix it. He had insisted that all ties to Shepard's previous life be cut, but the plan was unraveling at every step. First off, the pilot and the doctor. She had to admit they were both extremely capable, more so than any of the other dossiers they had seen, and the Illusive Man had insisted on 'blind' selections, so the names and associations had been removed from the selection records. The picks were based strictly on experience and merit. Then, Archangel turned out to be the damn Turian, Garrus Vakarian. Follow that up with the set up on Horizon with Williams; that had gone just peachy. All it did was piss the commander off, resulting in a very ugly situation for all parties involved. Miranda sighed heavily and rested her forehead in her hands, elbows on her desk.

And then there was Illium; that was definitely the chart topper. On the way to see Dr T'Soni they ran into that Parasini woman, which in and of itself was not bad... until Shepard let slip that T'Soni was her bondmate. Bondmate for God's sake! How did that slip through the profile? Hope Lillium was a dead woman for missing that little tidbit of data. Now, Miranda had to somehow untangle this Gordian knot and make sense of it all. Unfortunately, she also realized that the answer did not start with the Illusive Man; it started with her conversation with Shepard about motivation and needing someone to care about. Miranda now knew that 'someone' was Dr Liara T'Soni, which was probably exactly where Shepard was right now.

The worst part about the whole thing was that Miranda had realized she actually liked Shepard. The commander didn't match any of the preconceptions Miranda had of her after reading the profiles that had been assembled. As far as Miranda was concerned, that meant every one of their so-called profile experts was off the mark. The XO didn't find the commander that hard to read; she was consistently straight up and honest. Hard to believe that such a person could actually exist, maybe, but hard to read? No, not difficult at all. Miranda was starting to realize that Cerberus personnel were so stilted, maybe they couldn't see the proverbial forest for the trees. They added hidden agendas where none existed, but the truth of the matter was that Shepard just simply, truly... cared.

Apparently that was a very difficult concept for Cerberus personnel to grasp.

That realization, however, did nothing to solve the operative's dilemma. Where was Commander Shepard? Miranda had a very good idea, but with no way to track the commander, she could not validate her theory. Worse yet, there was no 'best case' path for this scenario to follow. The Illusive Man had made it very clear that T'Soni was one relationship that was not to be renewed, and the commander had made it very clear that the relationship was the one and only thing that truly motivated her to complete the mission. There was no middle ground between those two positions and for the first time in her life, Miranda had absolutely no idea what to do.
Shepard woke sometime in the middle of the night and glanced at the Asari snuggled tightly to her, contentedly sleeping. Her tranquil face was the anchor in the storm that Sam's life had become since the moment the Normandy had come under attack by the Collectors. Sam gently stroked Liara's face and fluttered a soft kiss across her lips. Liara smiled in her sleep and made a happy humming noise but did not awaken, so Sam smiled and kept caressing her cheek. She was so caught up in the moment, she didn't even realize when she had started to quietly sing an old Faith Hill song that popped unbidden into her mind... 'Breathe.'

Liara felt wakefulness tugging at her, but she was warm and content in a dream about Samantha coming home to her. She fought to stay asleep, to hold onto the dream and the comfort it gave. Slowly, her mind started to register a voice softly singing, and whether she was ready or not to wake up, she found herself catching hold of the words... and the fact that it was Samantha's voice. As her eyes peeked open to embrace reality, she couldn't keep from smiling. Samantha was there, not just in a dream, but in the flesh. Sam's eyes were closed as she gently caressed her lover's cheek and sang softly to her, and it swelled Liara's heart, her pulse rate surging. "In a way I know my heart is waking up; As all the walls come tumbling down; I'm closer than I've ever felt before and I know and you know; There's no need for words right now... 'Cause I can feel you breathe; It's washing over me."

Sam heard Liara take a sharp inhale of breath and opened her eyes, realizing the Asari was awake. Her soft lilting voice faded as she finished the line, "Suddenly I'm melting into you," and she leaned over, now humming the tune, while catching Liara's lips into a deep, sensuous kiss that was eagerly returned.

When Liara met her lips with such enthusiasm, Sam felt the heat spike in her core and groaned into the kiss, sliding the hand that had been caressing a cheek down to the folds at the side of Liara's neck and massaging them gently up to the base of her crest. She felt Liara shudder under her touch as she reached out to wrap Sam in a full-body embrace, entwining their legs together and wrapping an arm about her waist, pulling Sam fully on top of her. Liara's other hand went to its customary position and her fingers were soon entangled in the hair at the back of Sam's neck. When she couldn't take any more, Sam pulled away and gasped for air, only to have her lips pulled back down to an open mouth and a tongue dancing for contact. Sam opened her kiss and joined in the duel, while rolling over and pulling her partner along with her, so Liara ended up on top. Sam's hands, no longer needed to suspend herself over the ardent Asari, raked slowly down Liara's back, remembering all the pressure points they had so diligently sought out during their previous encounters. Liara broke the kiss, panting, and moaning in pleasure from the stimulation, arching strongly into Samantha's talented hands. She managed an "Oh... Goddess!" before her breathing became too ragged to allow words.

Sam finished her sweep and slid the fingers of one hand gently into the sensitive folds in the small of Liara's back while her other hand planted on Liara's hip, shifting her just slightly to the side so their legs were offset. Seeking relief from her own ache that was building, Samantha breathed "Liara!" as she rocked her hips to rub her clit down her lover's leg, using the pressure of the hand grasping Liara's hip to provide more friction. When Liara felt Sam's dripping warmth grind against her thigh, she felt her own stomach muscles ripple and an answering wave of wetness exploded from her core. When she heard the want in Sam's voice as she spoke her name, Liara forced her hips up, breaking contact, and heard a distressed whine of protest from her bondmate. The distress turned instantly to mewls of delight as Liara replaced her thigh with her hand, providing pressure to the wanting nub with her thumb while drawing teasing circles in the wet folds with her finger tips. Sam's hips immediately bucked into Liara's hand, seeking more as she hissed between clenched teeth, "Oh, by my Blue Goddess... Liara... please!" Samantha also answered in kind, her hand sliding from the hip to Liara's own dripping center. The minute Sam's fingers started to slide across the wet folds, Liara whimpered in pleasure and her eyes swirled black, Sam readily welcoming the loving mental touch to augment the physical pleasures they were already sharing. When she embraced the union meld,
Sam felt a difference from what she remembered. There was an undercurrent of desperation and a hint of fear in Liara's mental touch that had never been there, even during the desperate meld after her mother's death, when Liara was looking for reconnection, for an affirmation of life.

Liara's insecurities echoed through their initial contact and Sam answered it by sending strong thoughts of love and tenderness toward her bondmate. The physical aspect of their joining fell to the background while Sam focused on strengthening and renewing their intellectual and emotional connections, calling up images of the nights they made love on the Normandy, the night after Liara showed her Armali, and the night on the beach under the Thessian moon; all the time, pulling Liara deeper into her memories, recalling every shared moment she could remember. Samantha basically relived their life together. Their three years, from Therum to the present moment, passed in the blink of an eye, and Liara followed willingly, seeking reassurance, gradually opening herself up as well and fully renewing and strengthening their bond. They had experienced deep melds before, sharing thoughts, emotions and physical pleasures to the point where they were practically echoes of one another, but this was different. For the first time ever, every one of Sam and Liara's memories were naked to inspection; there were absolutely no walls and boundaries ceased to exist. They suddenly found themselves on another plane of existence, surrounded by a silent darkness, yet each could see their partner with ease, each alight with their own unique aura, seeming to echo the color of their eyes.

Liara's aura was cast in an azure blue, her form glowing with bright sparks of power that followed her movements. Sam was entranced by this new aspect of her bondmate, and soaked up her radiant beauty as she approached. She looked down at her own hands and realized she was also enveloped by an aura, though a deep sea-foam green. She turned her hands palms up and realized where Liara radiated sparks, like burning embers flying off a fire, Sam's movements generated swirling eddies and tides whose ripples also faded with time and distance. Liara's eyes were wide with wonder as she looked at the Human embodiment of the Thessian seas before her, and though words had no power in the silence, Samantha somehow understood that Liara had never been here, had never experienced nor even heard of this phenomena in Asari culture. They tentatively reached toward one another, exploring the new territory together, and as they lay their palms together, their auras sparked and swirled together and they both gradually... changed. Their auras blended into a unified beautiful teal, though each still maintained their individuality; Liara's embers remained azure, and Sam's swirls were still a subdued sea-foam. Their eyes lifted together and they stared into each other's souls with a connection deeper than either thought possible, and their fears, insecurities and doubts fled before the strength of their love.

They stood together, their eyes smiling as pure contentment settled over both of their beings. In some way, they both sensed when a new equilibrium had been established and they leaned into one another and kissed. The kiss plunged them back to the physical plane and their physical joining screamed back to the forefront with a joint orgasm tearing through them both with incredible intensity. Their shared ecstasy erupted from throats no longer silenced, their heat a raging forest fire and the aftershocks like ripples turned tsunami, leaving them both crying from the overwhelming emotions and trembling in their exhaustion. The meld fell away, Liara too tired to maintain it and the two collapsed together on the bed in a mess of soaked sheets and entangled limbs. Liara closed her eyes and listened to Sam's racing heartbeat as it gradually slowed and lulled her back into sleep. Sam's groggy tongue slurred its way through "I love you" before she too was dragged down by her fatigue. Both were so tired, neither noticed that the words also reverberated through a mental connection that should not have existed after Liara dropped the meld.

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Liara's omnitool chimed at 0700 hrs and she silenced it by knocking it off the nightstand while trying to find the appropriate button. Fortunately, when it rang again ten minutes later, it was out of reach.
and she actually had to get up to find it on the floor in order to shut it off. She collapsed back on the
bed in exhaustion, but all her activity had awakened Shepard as well, who reached over and laid a
hand gently on her hip... caressing... soothing. Liara thought to herself how nice it was to wake up
next to her bondmate, and was somewhat surprised when Samantha seemed to answer her. "I want
to wake up this way every day the rest of my life, Blue."

Liara smiled and rolled over to Sam, whispering, "Mmmm, me too." Liara's eyes wanted so badly to
just stay closed, and she whispered again, "Goddess, I am so tired... what did you do to me last
night?" Sam rolled over to face her, "You mean that wasn't a dream? We actually did... whatever that
was?" Suddenly Sam bolted upright in the bed. "Blue?... we didn't... you're not pregnant, are you?"

Liara wanted to laugh, but she could see the panic threatening to erupt from the commander, so
answered earnestly, "No, Samantha, that was definitely not a reproductive meld." Liara's thoughts
kept running, *I have absolutely no idea what that was,* but she did not say it out loud.

Sam asked, "You don't?" For the second time, Liara took notice that Sam was answering questions
she hadn't actually voiced, and she sat up. The first time may have been coincidence, but the second
was too specific to be chance. Slightly worried, she asked Sam, "I don't what?"

Sam looked at her like she was too groggy to know what she was saying, "You said you had no idea
what that was. I was just asking for more details." Sam was suddenly very much awake, noting a
panic spreading across Liara's face. "Blue, what's the matter?" Liara didn't answer, and her breathing
rate picked up to the point where Sam was worried she was going to hyperventilate. "Ok, Liara.
Look at me." When their eyes met, alarmed blues met calm greens and Sam cupped both sides of
Liara's face as she spoke gently, "Breathe, Blue. Relax. Easy. Slow. I'm here for you. Better. Now...
tell me what's going on."

Liara looked scared when she answered, "I don't know, Samantha. You are hearing my thoughts... I
did not ask that question aloud, yet you answered it like you heard it plain as day. It would not be
unusual if we were melded, but we are not! I don't know how that is possible... I have heard of Asari
getting 'stuck' but I've heard it is painful. This... does not hurt me... you are not in any pain, are you?"
Samantha shook her head and thought *I love you* and waited for a reaction.

Liara's eyes got big and she said, "Goddess! I love you too, but what is this? I've never heard of such
a thing!" She pushed back to lean against the headboard and Sam dropped her hands into her lap,
Liara now out of reach. Liara could feel waves of encouragement from her bondmate and had to
comment, "I have to admit, it is somewhat comforting to feel your reassurances wrapping about me,
if I could only understand how it is possible. Why are you smiling like that?"

Sam spoke aloud, "You didn't hear me that time, did you?" Liara shook her head no, and Sam
reached out and grabbed her hand. And now? Liara yanked her hand away like she had been burned
and looked at her partner in shock. She slowly gave her hand back to Samantha. *So we need to be
touching?* Sam laughed and said, "Apparently so. I believe whatever happened last night created an
'auto-meld' if such a thing exists."

Liara's brow wrinkled in concentration for a moment and then she spoke. "But I still felt emotions
when we weren't touching. So, for clear thought, we need contact. Emotions do not need contact... but I wonder if distance affects it?" Sam let out a deep sigh in relief. Liara's fear had been replaced
by her scientific curiosity and Sam actually felt the calming of her nerves in response. Liara also felt
the echo in the change. "Oh... my. That was me... wasn't it?"

Sam laughed. "Yeah. This could take some getting used to. We'll have to experiment with it later, but
for now, let's get some breakfast. I actually woke up hungry. It's a good sign I'm on the road to
recovery!"
Liara suddenly looked at the clock. "Breakfast! Judea is going to meet us here in twenty minutes!"
The corner of Sam's lips twitched up as she pushed calm and relaxed thoughts toward Liara, her face breaking into a full up grin when Liara turned and looked at her, message received. Liara smiled, "Hmmm. This could be useful." They both got up and raced to the shower to start their day.

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Over breakfast, Sam and Liara talked over their plans for the next two days. Sam needed to chase down the Justicar and the assassin, and apparently Judea was now glued to her hip for the duration. The pilot was thrilled to be in the field, instead of in the cockpit for a few days. Sam was a little concerned with her being out of practice. Judea was adamant that her cockpit time was limited, and she was always working local jobs for Dr T'Soni, Information Broker, so was not as out of practice as the commander may assume. Shepard reluctantly agreed to her assistance, but on the condition that Shepard would send her packing the minute she felt Judea was compromising the squad. Judea did not hesitate to agree, and Liara was the one to breathe a sigh of relief. She now had someone she really trusted to watch Samantha's back on the ground team. Liara promised to try to not worry too much, but she had a full day at the office and a list of things that had to be done, otherwise she would have insisted on being at Sam's side as well. She told Shepard to call her or stop by the office whenever she wanted, and certainly if she needed any information or assistance. Liara knew how limited their time was, so promised to make herself available around Samantha's schedule.

Shepard looked balefully at her omnitool and turned it back on. Liara watched her and laughed, "I wondered how it was possible that Commander Shepard was not bothered at all hours of the night last night." As Shepard's wrist started beeping every few seconds, Liara started laughing at the look of consternation that rapidly expanded across her face.

Shepard grimaced, "I have eighteen messages... just from Miranda!" Shepard was suddenly hit with an intense wall of hatred and she jerked her head up to look at Liara. As soon as she made eye contact, Liara's eyes showed surprise and she looked away, blushing. Sam's eyes narrowed as she spoke, "We are so talking about that later, Doctor. Perhaps I should have paid more attention last night... I think I missed something in your story telling." Liara closed her eyes and sighed; she knew that tone of voice and knew that Shepard was not going to let it go. She resigned herself to at least a small portion of the night being very unpleasant.

Shepard stood and Judea quickly followed. Liara walked over, wrapped her arms around her bondmate and gave her a deep kiss. "That's my promise for 'later,' Commander. Come back to me safe."

Shepard smiled, "How can I say no to an offer like that?" The commander messaged Miranda to let her know she was not AWOL and she'd meet her on the Normandy shortly. With a last smile for Liara, she and Judea headed out the door.
Shifting Allegiances

Shepard rolled onto the Normandy like a storm. First stop was the Armory to talk to Jacob. She introduced Judea, told him she'd be going on the Justicar mission with them, and to provide her with any upgrades to armor and weapons he thought she could effectively use. "When you're done, pass her over to Garrus. They know each other and can catch up if there is time. I'll be talking to Miranda."

Shepard then made a direct transit to Miranda's office, expecting the operative to be positively furious. As she stepped in the door, she realized she could not have been further from the truth. Miranda looked up when the door opened and Shepard saw an immense wave of relief wash over the normally stoic XO. Miranda stood up so quickly her chair fell over. As soon as the door closed, she blurted out, "Oh, thank God!" Shepard was stumped, so didn't say anything, just waiting for Miranda to explain. Miranda seemed to collect herself, turning and setting her chair back upright, then turned and faced the commander.

Shepard could tell the operative was uncharacteristically nervous, and her curiosity got the better of her. "Miranda... is everything alright? Did something happen while I was... offline?"

Miranda sat down at her desk and gestured to the couch in front. "Commander, please sit. This could take a while. As far as if something happened, other than me thinking I lost the Illusive Man's four billion credit investment... you could say that. You could say I had an epiphany." Miranda started at the beginning of Project Lazarus and told Shepard a lot. She told her of the profiles, and how wrong they all were. She told her of the instructions from the Illusive Man to alienate the previous crew and sever the ties from Shepard to her previous life. She told her of the dossiers, and how they were blind selections, and it was turning out that Shepard already had the best, and they just ended up selecting the same people. And then she told Shepard about the dilemma over Liara. Shepard jumped up, ready to fight, but Miranda held up both hands in supplication. "Please, Commander. Don't. This is my epiphany. I know the Illusive Man is wrong, but I don't know how to fix it without getting someone killed."

Shepard just stared at her XO in amazement. After a couple minutes of silence, amazed that Miranda didn't feel the need to either defend TIM or jump in and fill the quiet, Shepard finally sat back down and spoke. "Who are we trying to not get killed? He wouldn't target Liara...? Would he?"

Miranda sighed and hung her head. "Well, you certainly didn't earn any points by walking out on him." She looked up and met Shepard's eyes. "And I honestly don't know who is more at risk. I tell him about the importance of the relationship and all the profilers who missed it are dead. I let it back in the door, so maybe I'm dead as well... and if he's really that set against it, Liara would most certainly be a target."

Shepard watched Miranda as she spoke, and saw none of the normal signs of deception. "Well, that doesn't paint a pretty picture, does it? We need this mission to succeed; so I hate to say it, but of the choices you just gave me... you tell him about the relationship and we sacrifice the profilers, if indeed that's the path TIM takes. Me... Liara... you, not acceptable losses at this point. So what's next? How much time do we have?"

Miranda replied weakly, "He probably already knows that you've met back up with Liara, but we can stall for a little while. I figured you'd want to make provisions while we were here. And if at all possible, I would like to meet with Liara."
Shepard laughed at that. "Now who's suicidal? I got a distinct impression from her this morning that she would like nothing better than to smear you the length of the cargo deck at the earliest opportunity. I don't know why, but she harbors a particularly strong hatred for you, Operative Lawson. Care to shed light?"

Miranda nodded. "You deserve at least that much. To Liara, the Illusive Man is an abstract concept, other than a brief holo with him explaining the Lazarus project. So, from her perspective, the face of Cerberus is me. I'm sure she attributes all the deception, all the pressure and angling, everything... to me. And I don't blame her in the slightest. But, I realize how much of a blind fool I've been, thanks to you, and I want to make up for it. I doubt she can ever forgive me, but I want to make the effort... to at least have her give me the chance to make it up to you both. I mean, I did bring you back. That has to count for something. And I gave you at least 400 years; that should also help my cause." The commander's face suddenly went completely blank. Miranda looked at her and called to her, "Shepard? Shepard! Are you all right?"

Shepard looked at Miranda and simple said, "I forgot. I can't believe I didn't tell her!"

Miranda was puzzled at first, but then realized what the commander was talking about. "You didn't tell her about the extended life span? Good! Then let me! Her office will be the first stop on the path to the Justicar!"

Shepard walked into Liara's office alone, and the Asari was in her arms in a flash. As Liara hugged the commander, she whispered in Shepard's ear, "I missed you, my love!"

Shepard laughed. "But I've only been gone a few hours..."

Liara caressed her bondmate's cheek, "I don't care. I've missed you for two years...I can't possibly make up for that lost time, no matter what we do!"

Shepard took a small step back and made eye contact as she spoke, "Liara, I have people with me. They're waiting in the reception area to come in. Of course there's Judea, but I also have Garrus... he has some things to say. When I confronted him, he apologized to me for his lack of belief in me. He already had the opportunity to talk to Judea, but he feels he owes you an apology as well... Will you at least listen to him?"

Liara looked at the floor. "I almost begged him to stay, and he walked away from me... from you, Shepard. I don't know what to say to him." She looked at Shepard beseechingly, hoping for some help, but there was none.

"You two just need to figure it out. He seems sincere, but you have to make your own choices on how you deal with it. I can't tell you to forgive him, that's up to you." Sam looked at Liara with a slightly pained expression, knowing the Turian's abandonment had hurt the Asari. "Also, I have Miranda with me."

Liara's rage from the morning welled back up and Shepard could feel it pressing against the back of her head. Time had not seemed to dampen the new emotional link the two shared. "Please, just hear her out. She has some... very interesting things to say." Shepard winced as the pressing anger turned into a sharp pain behind her eyes.

Liara watched the pained expression cross the Spectre's face. "Samantha? What's wrong?"

Shepard squeezed her eyes closed for a second, Liara's concern slightly tempering the anger at
Lawson, then answered as she opened them back up. "That emotional bond we seem to have forged? Your anger at Miranda is drilling holes in my skull right now..."

A look of surprise and then sorrow flashed across Liara's face. "Oh, Goddess! I'm so sorry, Shepard!" Shepard felt the pain withdraw to a much more tolerable level as Liara continued, "I'll have to learn to shield myself a bit better..."

She didn't get far before Shepard stepped up, hugged her and interrupted her statement, whispering in her ear, "Don't you dare shield your feelings from me, Blue. We'll get used to it. It's just that it's all so new right now. We'll adapt... but I don't want that adaptation being us hiding feelings from one another! Agreed?"

Liara smiled in adoration. "I love you, Samantha Shepard, and I'll agree... with conditions. We have to make sure they don't become a distraction." Liara got very serious. "With what we have coming, a distraction like that could be dangerous, if not deadly." She quirked up one of her eyebrow markings as she asked, "Agreed?"

Sam nodded and agreed, then asked Liara who she wanted to see first. It was Garrus, and she asked Shepard to stay while they talked. Liara found Garrus to be very sincere, and while she wasn't quite ready to truly forgive him, she did accept his apology for what it was worth. It had all worked out in the end, and though she didn't tell Garrus, Liara still had the Seer's words in the back of her mind, about him delivering Shepard safely to her. Liara needed Garrus to be at his top form, because she didn't know if what the Seer had talked about had yet come to pass. Either way, Garrus was a strong team mate and Shepard needed her sniper to be on his toes.

When they were done, Garrus and Miranda traded places. Shepard insisted on staying, though Liara did not protest so it didn't matter. As Miranda retold everything she had told Shepard earlier about the Illusive Man's desire to cut off all the relationships, Liara exploded. Her lips twisted in a snarl, Liara spat out, "You told Shepard I worked for the Shadow Broker!"

Miranda was caught completely off guard, and her surprise showed in her voice as she shouted, "What? I never said any such thing!"

Liara's hands started to glow blue as she growled out, "Don't you dare lie to me!"

Shepard quickly stepped in front of Liara, grasping her upper arms. "Whoa! Hold on! Miranda didn't tell me that! TIM is the one who gave me the crew rundown." Without letting go of her bondmate, Shepard slowly turned her head to look at Miranda, narrowing her eyes. "You tell me the truth this instant. Were you part of TIM's deception about Liara working for the Shadow Broker, in an attempt to keep us apart?"

Miranda shook her head vehemently. "That's absurd! I never knew the Illusive Man told you that! Dr T'Soni helped me steal you from the Broker. He would never trust her to work for him. If she had approached the Broker, he would have killed her! I may have left a lot of information out in the past, Commander, but I have never intentionally lied to you and I don't plan on starting now."

Shepard felt the energy draining from her bondmate's arms, so let go and stepped back out of the way so they could finish their 'discussion.' By the time Miranda was done, Liara grudgingly accepted her explanations and her offer of assistance. "I'm not going to trust you any time soon, Ms Lawson, but I can promise you I won't be the one hiring your assassin." Shepard let out a big breath she didn't realize she was holding, and then looked at Miranda expectantly.

Miranda caught the look and jerked her head back to refocus on Liara. "Oh... right. There is one other thing I need to tell you..." As Liara looked ready to change her mind about the assassin,
Miranda hurried to explain about the nanite technology and its effects. As Miranda finished talking about the actual technology and started explaining about the extended life spans, Liara's eyes slowly drifted off of Miranda and completely focused on Shepard.

Shepard recognized the glassy-eyed look and could feel the overwhelming mix of love and disbelief radiating off the Asari through their new link. Shepard locked eyes with Liara, but spoke to Miranda, cutting her off, "Thanks, Miranda... we'll... uhm... finish the complete explanation later. If you wouldn't mind waiting in the reception area, I'll join you in a minute."

A quick glance between the two and Miranda completely understood that the commander was asking for privacy and she was out of the room like a bullet. Shepard stepped up to Liara, slowly enveloping the Asari in her arms, and held her tight. She felt the soft sobs of her lover, and felt the damp tears dripping down onto the base of her neck. "I know. A bit of a shock, isn't it?"

Shepard felt Liara choke out a light laugh. "Goddess. I'm just barely getting a grip on the fact that you're actually alive and here with me, and now I learn I have you for at least 400 years?" Liara leaned back and caught Sam's eyes with her own. She wanted to speak, but couldn't find the words to say. Shepard leaned forward and captured her blue lips in a solid kiss, and the full meld instantly took over. The sensations and strength of emotions were staggering, and Samantha broke off the kiss, pulling back. Liara tried to lean back in, but Shepard reluctantly held her at bay. "By the Gods, Blue. I... we'll finish this later, I promise... but I... I can't believe I'm saying this... but I've got to go."

A resigned look swept over Liara's face. "Someday, you're not going to run off immediately following one of us saying, 'duty calls.' I don't care what time you get done with the Justicar. Come to the apartment when you're done and bring Judea with you."

"A blood-raged Krogan couldn't keep me away." Shepard smiled as she caressed the Asari's cheek in farewell and then turned and left the office. Liara watched her go and locked the door. She logged onto her secure terminal and sent a short message to Hannah, simply telling her that all was now well on the home front.

The group headed down to the transportation and shipping hubs to find Tracking Officer Dara and Shipping Officer Seryna. On the way, they passed a Salarian who was on a call and over heard him mention Nassana Dantius. Shepard's ears perked up and she slowed to eavesdrop on the conversation; Dantius was the Asari Emissary that had lied to Shepard about her sister Dahlia being kidnapped, when actually Dahlia had been the leader of the merc band at the coordinates Nassana had provided. What the Asari had pitched as a rescue was actually a hit, because Dahlia was blackmailing Nassana, who wanted Shepard to remove the problem. Reining in her thoughts and refocusing on the task at hand, Shepard listened in on the call.

According to the Salarian, he was working in the Dantius Towers when Nassana started tossing her workers out... and her mercs were killing any of the innocent workers who didn't leave fast enough. In his haste to escape, he had dropped their family breeding record somewhere along the way as he exited the building. The loss would make the Kirosa family highly undesirable for breeding contracts and potentially cause the end of the entire Kirosa line. Shepard's blood boiled; no way she'd let a criminal like Nassana Dantius be responsible for the end of an entire Salarian family line. That damn Asari is still playing dirty and causing chaos! I'm going to make time while I'm here to take care of her once and for all...

Shepard stopped at the shipping desk to talk to Seryna, her contact for the assassin, Thane Krios. Cautious, but forthcoming, Seryna gave Shepard information she almost couldn't believe. It was her good fortune that the assassin was actually hunting Nassana Dantius. Shepard had every intention of
letting him complete the job before she tried to recruit him, but that meant her timing would have to be perfect. The ground team would have to arrive at Nassana's office just before the assassination; too early and they may tip Dantius off, too late and Krios would be gone before they could talk to him. Liara had certainly pointed them in the right direction; Seryna used to run Nassana's security and she was more than happy to give them the complete rundown on the setup in the Dantius Towers as well as the timing on the attack. The team walked away happy. They had thirty-six hours to find Samara and then meet Seryna at the transportation dock. She had offered to drop them at the Towers and Shepard happily accepted.

Next stop was to visit Officer Dara, but Shepard and Judea had a surprise as they approached the Tracking Office; the commando Shiala saw them and greeted them by name. Shepard looked at the Asari and quickly realized all was not well. Shiala was... green; she looked like one of the Thorian clones, not like herself. "Shiala! What's the matter? Why are you here?"

Shiala looked at the floor, embarrassed. "Obviously, you've noticed my coloring. My biotic abilities are unstable as well. It is a symptom of a larger problem... some of the colonists also had health problems as a result of the Thorian. We hired Baria Frontiers to do medical scans to determine the cause and provide treatment for next to nothing in exchange for research they wanted to accomplish. We were not careful enough in the contract review. It apparently allows the company to perform invasive procedures without our consent. That's why I'm here, but I cannot persuade the rep to change the contract."

Shepard and Shiala spoke for a bit about the terms of the contract and Shepard agreed to help. She shook her head. "Let me talk to the Baria Frontiers rep and see what I can do."

Shiala's face showed great relief, "I appreciate it, Shepard. She would not give me the time of day when I approached her on it."

Shepard headed directly to the rep and didn't even get to say hello before the Asari stared her down and started speaking, "I saw your conversation, Human. You're here to complain about the medical contract. It's perfectly legal so do not waste your time bothering me."

Shepard was surprised at the hostility in the Asari, and questioned why she was so angry. It didn't take long to dig into the root of the problem. She blamed aliens for all the bad things in the galaxy; Salarian explorers releasing the Rachni, then uplifting the Krogans, the warlike Turians eager to bomb away every problem, or the Humans... the newest bullies in the galaxy. The Asari were the peacekeepers, and every war that plagued the galaxy was caused by some other race. She ended her tirade, "My people's deaths are on your hands!"

Shepard caught the tone of her last statement, and it seemed to carry more weight than a generality, so she asked the Asari, "Just whose deaths are we talking about here?"

The Asari spit venomously, "The mother of my daughters was killed on the Quarian homeworld during the initial Geth uprising." Her voice then lost its power as she turned away in tears and continued, "My daughters died on the Citadel when the Geth attacked. One worked in the Embassy, the other a greeter for the Consort. I am not speaking in hypotheticals, Human. The aliens will never be my allies. The best they can do is give me useful medical data."

Shepard knew Asari were generally social beings, but she was still surprised by this Asari's openness about the cause of her grief. Shepard looked at her with an expression of sorrow on her face. "I'm very sorry for your losses, but your bondmate chose to be with the Quarians. Your daughters willingly worked with aliens every day in their jobs at the Citadel. It does not sound like they hated aliens. How do you think they would feel to see you treating them this way? You dishonor their memory. The colonists were trying to live peacefully and because of the Geth and the Thorian
creature they have also suffered loss. It is within your power to not add to their anguish." As Shepard spoke, she watched a change come over the Baria Frontiers rep; her anger changed to angst and the pain of loss. Shepard knew the look well.

The Asari backed to the wall and squatted down, crying when confronted by Shepard's words. "Goddess. They would be so angry with me... I am sending an amended contract. No more tests, no fees. You are correct; there is enough grief in the galaxy. I don't need to add to it." Shepard extended her hand and the Asari took it, rising slowly and turning away in her grief. Shepard had nothing to add, so quietly turned and walked away.

Shiala was very happy with the results and promised to keep working with the colonists to improve their situation. Shepard wished Shiala well, and reminded her when and if the colonists stopped needing her or wanting her at the colony, she would always be welcome back on Thessia. They parted with a smile, and Shepard proceeded into the Tracking Office to talk to Dara. Officer Dara was instantly nervous at the query, worried that Samara had killed someone already and a diplomatic incident was about to explode in her face. After assuring the officer they just needed to find the Justicar, Dara was happy to point them on their way, with a few warnings about Justicars in general. The Justicar code was very strict and unforgiving; the innocent had nothing to fear, but Justicars were bound by their code to punish lawbreakers, generally with lethal force. To them, the law was black and white, with no middle ground. It made Shepard realize she would have to question the Justicar carefully before recruiting her, if for no other reason than everyone else they had on the list to recruit...a convict, a thief, an assassin.

Following her instructions, they hailed a cab to the commercial space port. As they landed, a detective was harassing a Volus about not leaving Illium until some murder was solved. He claimed no knowledge, and Shepard wondered if Officer Dara's worst fear of the Justicar had just occurred. After the detective left, Shepard approached the Volus and asked him some questions, finding out the only way to get to the Justicar was to talk to Detective Anaya at the police station; she had sealed the crime scene, and the Justicar had been allowed access. With that information, the Normandy ground crew headed in to talk to the detective. As they walked up, Detective Anaya looked directly at Shepard, "Nice guns... try not to use them in my district. What can I do for you?"

Shepard explained about her hunt for the Justicar and the detective was actually pleased. She had been ordered by her superiors to detain the Justicar and convince her to leave Illium before anything happened. This posed a significant problem for the detective; being Asari, she knew all about Justicars and how focused they were on their missions. The detective had no authority over the Justicar, and Samara would kill her if she felt the detective was impeding her current mission. The detective gave Shepard permission to enter the crime scene and find the Justicar, in the hope Shepard could convince her to leave... and solve the detective's problem without anyone ending up dead. Anaya looked at Shepard and said it plainly enough, "I have no interest in dying, so if you can lure her away with some big noble cause before I have to carry out my orders, I'm thrilled to help you. I'll send word to the line to let you in. Be careful, you look like you can handle yourself, but the local Eclipse mercs have been all over those back alleys lately."

They began to encounter mercs almost as soon as they crossed the police line. Being Eclipse, they also had mech support, but the resistance was nothing they hadn't faced before, and with Miranda and Judea both backing up Shepard with biotics as well as conventional weapons, the targets were down before Garrus even got his sniper out. They pressed on quickly, eager to find the Justicar... and Shepard was more than happy to erase a few more mercs from existence. As they went through a doorway and crossed a second police line, they found their target. As they walked in, they heard a scream and a merc smashed into the wall, collapsing to the floor, dead. An Eclipse lieutenant stood facing the Justicar, "Those were my best troops."
Shepard watched the lieutenant as she was approached by the Justicar, an older Asari who carried herself very regally, dressed in red armor that was amazingly low cut. It immediately made Shepard think of the night before and someplace else she'd rather be. She quickly shook her head and refocused, noticing the gold trim on the armor, as well as a gold neckband and some type of red accents or accessories across her forehead and temples.

The Justicar was glowing, sheathed in blue biotic power, "Tell me what I need to know, and I will be gone from here. Where did you send her?"

The lieutenant was obviously not very smart, or at least uneducated in the Justicar way. Just from what Dara and Anaya had told her, Shepard knew the merc was dead if she didn't answer Samara's questions. Apparently the merc didn't know any better as she spoke, "You think I'd betray her? She would hurt me in ways you can't imagine."

Samara pressed for answers, pacing back and forth before the merc, but never taking her eyes off her target. "The name of the ship. Your life hangs on the answer, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant didn't budge. "You can kill me, but one of us will take you down, Justicar." As she finished her sentence, she raised her pistol to shoot at Samara.

Shepard's team watched as Samara lifted the merc and threw her through a window, and then floated herself down to follow. The lieutenant was still alive and Samara calmly walked up to the prone merc and placed her foot on the merc's neck, pinning her to the floor. "What was the name of the ship she left on?"

Shepard had to give the lieutenant credit; she did not break under pressure. Her response to the Justicar was an emphatic, "Go to hell!"

Samara was very calm as she quietly spoke her final words to the lieutenant. "Find peace in the embrace of the goddess." Samara then unceremoniously twisted her leg and foot hard, breaking the merc's neck. She turned to Shepard, speaking, "My name is Samara, a servant of the Justicar Code. My quarrel is with these Eclipse sisters, but I see four well-armed people before me. Are we friend, or foe?"

Shepard showed both her hands, palms out and empty of weapons, introduced herself, and explained her mission and her purpose for being there. Samara nodded politely, "You honor me, but I am in the middle of an investigation. Though I sense the truth in what you say, I seek an incredibly dangerous fugitive. I cornered her here, but the Eclipse sisters smuggled her off-world. I must find the name of the ship she left on before the trail grows cold."

They all turned as they heard Detective Anaya's voice behind them. "I wish you were willing to go with the Human, Justicar. I've been ordered to take you into custody if you won't leave."

Samara walked up to the detective, without fear or malice, "You risk a great deal by following your orders, Detective. I respect such bravery and, fortunately, I will not have to resist. My code obligates me to cooperate with you for one day. After that, I will return to my investigation."

Anaya just shook her head, knowing what was coming. "I won't be able to release you that soon, unless you promise to depart Illium."

Samara simply said, "You won't be able to stop me."

Before things got out of hand, Shepard stepped in. "Wait... just wait! Don't do anything rash! I have an offer... I am willing to press the Eclipse, and find the name of the ship for you... while you are in
The detective listened hopefully as Samara responded, "Yes. If you do that I will join you. The Code will be satisfied." As the detective and Samara prepared to leave, Samara had some final words of guidance. "Talk to the Volus, Pitne For. Eclipse mercs are preparing to kill him. Get the truth from him. He is involved in this and may know a way into the Eclipse base. Thank you, Shepard."

Pitne For was a coward; after a brief confrontation he willingly gave up instructions and his pass into the Eclipse base. The Eclipse was after For and his partner for smuggling a chemical onto Illium that boosted biotic power... but was also toxic. They had failed to tell the Eclipse about the toxic part, so Eclipse had put a contract out on him and his partner. Shepard had no sympathy, telling the Volus, "Good luck with that," and the team was soon on their way. As soon as they entered the base, they encountered their first mercs, along with mech support. Shepard immediately went into her Vanguard 'crash and blast' mode, pulling on her biotic charge and then blasting what remained with her shotgun, leaving the rest of her team scrambling to catch up. When they cleared the first room, Miranda grabbed Shepard's arm stopping her for a moment. "Shepard! Slow down, please... Pitne For neglected to mention the stuff is toxic even in its airborne state. Just passing through the clouds is dangerous. Your charge takes you through quickly, but we have to either wait for the cloud to clear, or be able to see beyond it to run to the next cover."

Shepard growled, "That little shit! Seems he didn't learn his lesson with the Eclipse, so this Spectre will make sure he pays for his mistake, once we're done here." After checking to make sure everyone on the squad was caught up and no one was suffering any lingering toxicity, she pressed onward. They entered a room and encountered a young Asari merc, claiming to have never killed. Shepard snorted, "Uh huh. And what about your initiation rite? Did you fake that too? Nobody's going to help you fake your first 'solo' kill. You had to do that all by your little self to earn your uniform. You chose your side, and you lost."

The merc yanked up her gun and pointed it at Shepard, yelling, "Screw that, bitch!" She got off one shot that bounced off Shepard's shields before the Normandy team buried her in ammo. Without so much as a second thought, they proceeded deeper into the base; after rounding a corner and climbing a set of stairs, they came into a large area with yet more mercs and mechs. Employing the same tactics, Shepard's crash and blast moved them quickly through the room, with Miranda and Judea close behind. Since the room was larger, Garrus hung back and picked targets off in the distance with his sniper, including exploding crates of the toxic chemical, long before the team got to them and allowing plenty of time for the toxic clouds to clear. He also exploded any that were left once the team went by them, to ensure the Eclipse didn't use or resell any of the toxic junk. They climbed yet another set of stairs, this time running into a rocket troop. While the mobile team focused on the close-in targets, Garrus eliminated the rocket threat with a clean headshot. Once that merc was down, the team advanced quickly through the room and rapidly located the stairs up to the forth level. The upper level had a wide open area and as they cleared the mercs and mechs, Shepard pulled on her biotic charge to take out the last merc she saw. As she finished the Eclipse sister off, she looked around, suddenly calling out a gunship and ducking down behind cover. Everyone dived for cover, but the gunship drifted off, never firing a shot. Afterward, they all progressed a bit more carefully, remembering what happened to Garrus the last time they faced down one of those.

Since the gunship didn't stick around, the team took advantage of it. Shepard charged forward, taking out a couple of mechs very quickly, and then catching some mercs in crossfire, because her charge flanked them. Garrus was working double time, protecting their exit point as more rocket troops entered the fray. As soon as they launched one rocket, it allowed Garrus to target them and remove them quickly from the fight. Judea was proving herself quite capable, moving quickly and protecting Shepard's back amazingly well. Only on her very first charge had Shepard taken any fire, and that was because she took Judea by surprise; it did not happen a second time. One of the terminals
Shepard hacked had an audio recording that matched the voice of the merc they had killed on the second level. Her name was Elnora, and the audio file confirmed she had killed Pitne For's partner to earn her uniform. Anaya would be happy to receive that information, so Shepard made a copy of it as evidence to turn into the Detective.

They cruised through another set of double doors and came to another large open area that only had a couple of mechs. As they crossed a large open-air bridge, Garrus shouted out, "Gunship above!" Shepard immediately heard his sniper bark as he took the first shot. The team immediately spread out, forcing the gunship to focus on only one of them at a time while the other four could chip away at its armor. The tactic worked well, and the gunship was downed relatively quickly with no one sustaining major injury. Garrus chuckled, "Well. That sure turned out better than last time!" Shepard flashed her friend a grin and they pressed on.

Shepard figured they were getting close to the heart of the base after they crossed the bridge; the door on the other side was actually locked and they had to pause to bypass it. All the other doors had opened automatically. Inside, they found a shipping manifest that made Shepard grin. It showed that Pitne For had sold 2000 units of the toxic chemical Minagen X3 to the Eclipse, along with 600 units of an illegal drug called Red Sand. She was definitely turning this over to the Detective as evidence against For as a smuggler of illegal goods. She was going to enjoy watching the Volus squirm. They stepped into a short hallway and found a Volus who was obviously on drugs. As he rambled, they team quickly figured out the Eclipse had used him as a test subject, that he used to work for Pitne For, who had apparently abandoned him in his attempt to get off Illium, and the leader of the Eclipse Sisters, Wasea, was in the very next room. He had every intention of going into the room and as he put it, "My biotics are unstoppable! I shall toss Captain Wasea about like a ragdoll!"

Miranda commented that having the Volus running around the battlefield could compromise their operation and Shepard shrugged, looked at the Volus and waived her hand at the door, saying, "Charge!" Judea was shocked by Shepard's response, not believing the commander would sacrifice the Volus, but as the staggering Volus turned to go to the door, Shepard reached out and gently pushed him over.

As the Volus rolled over and yawned, he said, "As soon as I'm done with my nap," and promptly fell asleep right where he landed.

The team worked their way around him, including the confused Judea. "Did you plan on that?"

Shepard chuckled, "Of course I did. No way I was going to let that poor guy in there with Eclipse sisters! It would have been suicide by mercenary! I would have stopped him one way or another; we just got lucky he decided to take a nap. Besides, he'll probably be useful to Anaya to testify against Pitne For. We'll let her know he's here, sleeping it off." Shepard's expression changed to pure business as she glanced around her team. With positive nods from the group, she opened the last door and entered a large warehouse.

A single mercenary stood near the back of the room reading a datapad. As the team walked in, she started to speak, "Everything's gone to hell since we smuggled that filthy creature off-world. First a Justicar shows up, now you. At least I can take pleasure in turning your head into a pulpy mass." As she finished, she biotically lifted one of the toxic canisters and launched it at the team.

Shepard immediately pulled on her biotics and completed her first charge to the Captain the second after she launched the canister. Wasea had a barrier and armor, but Shepard's charge dropped the barrier immediately, while her shotgun blast took down a huge chunk of her armor rating. Judea was right on Shepard's tail with a warp to finish off the armor. Garrus was locked on and waiting; as soon as the armor dropped to zero, a quick bark of the sniper and Wasea was no more. There were a
couple other Eclipse in the room, but they fell quickly once their Captain was dead. The team searched the room, collecting anything of value, including a datapad with the information they needed. Shepard made a copy and the team headed back to the police station, destroying any remaining toxic canisters they found on their way.

When they got back to the station, Shepard informed the Justicar they found her information. "Your fugitive left here two days ago on the AML Demeter."

The Justicar stood and faced the commander and spoke earnestly, "Shepard, you impress me. You fulfilled your part of the bargain, and I will fulfill mine."

Shepard looked at the Justicar and nodded. "Thank you, Samara, but before I can accept you on my crew, I need to ask you a couple of questions."

Samara responded, "But Commander, you have already completed your part of the bargain. Why would you do so before knowing I would meet your conditions?"

Shepard just shrugged, "Because it was the right thing to do. Had I not intervened, the path you were on would have cost innocent law enforcement officers their lives. I couldn't accept that; there had to be a better way."

Anaya's eyes got big, but she said nothing as the Justicar answered, "You are a woman of honor, Commander. It is my privilege to know you. What would you ask of me?"

The commander frowned. "I have specialists on my crew. Specialists that have very checkered pasts, and I can't have you harassing, arresting or killing them. They are very fundamental to the mission. I need you to promise me that you won't harm them, or impede their performance in any way."

The Justicar spoke frankly. "Understood, Shepard. Then I must be sworn to your service, so that I am never forced to choose between your orders and the Code."

Shepard looked at the Justicar and queried, "Apparently the Code allows such a thing, but why would you do that for me?"

Samara smiled at the Spectre as she spoke. "As you have answered before me, because it is the right thing to do. I must put the galaxy before my personal code." The Justicar's eyes went white, and she knelt on one knee, bowing her head to Shepard. "By the Code, I will serve you, Shepard. Your choices are my choices; your morals are my morals. Your wishes are my code." Samara then glowed blue with biotics, the final vestiges still trailing off her body as she stood and her eyes returned to their normal blue.

Anaya stood in awe, "I never thought I'd see a Justicar swear an oath of allegiance like that."

Samara looked at Shepard, "If you make me do anything extremely dishonorable, I may need to kill you when I am released from my oath."

Shepard was pretty sure the Justicar wasn't kidding, and she bowed her head in respect. "I am honored, Samara. Let us hope our paths never lead us to such conflict. I would like to learn more of your Code, to ensure I never give you cause to question my decisions or my commands."

Overall, Detective Anaya was very pleased with the results; no one on the police force had to die, her superiors would be pleased with the Justicar's departure, Shepard solved the murder and had also found evidence that would allow her to arrest the slime, Pitne For. Anaya looked at Shepard and thanked her again for helping out with the whole situation, and wished her luck on the mission. Shepard nodded politely at the officer and glanced at Judea, gesturing with her head at the door.
Shepard looked at Miranda and Garrus and asked them to escort the Justicar to the Normandy, informing Miranda she would be spending the night at the apartment again. Miranda smiled, "As you wish, Commander. I'll draft up a report to the Illusive Man, and we can look at it tomorrow before I send it. See you then."

With that, the team split up for the night and Shepard caught up to Judea and they strolled back to the apartment. Shepard grinned at the commando, "So, what do you think of your first day out with me, Judea? Today we had a Cerberus officer switch to our side and an Asari Justicar swear an oath to me..."

Judea just shook her head, laughing, "Shepard, you do accomplish the most amazing things..."
It was shortly after midnight by the time Shepard and Judea rolled into the apartment. Judea nodded to Shepard and hooked an immediate right to head toward the commando quarters. Shepard stepped over to the living room area and dropped her armor there, so she wouldn't have to do it in the bedroom. She then slipped up the stairs as quietly as she could, but was surprised when she didn't see Liara in bed. Shepard hadn't even thought about checking the office, but if Liara was still awake working, she should have come out when they entered the apartment. Shepard stopped and placed her hands on her hips in contemplation as she glanced around the room in the gentle blue glow of the aquariums. That's when the tender smile lit her face... Liara was asleep on one of the couches, with a pile of datapads beside her on the floor. Shepard flipped the covers down on the bed then stepped silently to the couch and knelt down, gently brushing the Asari's cheek with her hand and kissing her gently on the forehead. In a typical response, Liara murmured in her sleep and got a contented expression on her face but did not awaken. Shepard slipped her arms under the sleeping Asari, carried her to the bed and gently laid her down. She stripped naked, then slid in next to her beautiful Blue and gently pulled the covers up over them and snuggled in, propping herself up on her elbow to take in the view. *I have so missed this.*

She gently caressed Liara's arm and kissed her shoulder before nuzzling into her neck and kissing the folds along the base of her crest, taking in the comforting scent of eezo and Thessian rose. With the skin-to-skin contact, Shepard felt the light meld kick in, and though the Asari was not projecting actual words, Shepard could tell she experienced pleasure from the contact and it gave her an idea... she began to run her tongue along the folds of Liara's crest and slid her hand under Liara's shirt to begin penetrating the soft folds in her lower back. Liara's body readily responded and Shepard could feel the sleeping Asari's arousal start to climb as she arched against Shepard's hand. Shepard also spoke to her sleeping lover through the meld while she worked.

{Liaaaaaarra... Do you know how much I love you, Blue? I want to make love to you aaallllllll night long...}

Continuing to work her fingers through her lover's lower back folds and applying pressure in all the right places, Shepard shifted her tongue to move through the folds at the very base of her crest, down on her neck. Liara's breathing was getting ragged, and though still sleeping, she was beginning to moan in pleasure. With the first shudder, Shepard abandoned the lower back and gently pulled Liara's hip toward her, shifting her hand to the inside of Liara's thigh, all the while continuing to suckle on the folds along her crests, now more to the side of her neck, gently running her tongue through every crevice it could find. As Shepard felt the first hint of wetness, her hand shifted off the thigh and she started massaging the little blue nub with her thumb, while running her fingers in the adjacent silky folds. She continued along with her physical ministrations as well as her encouragement through the meld.

{I love you, Blue... I want to feel you... you are already so wet for me... I want to taste you on my tongue... love you more than anything in the galaxy... I want you to come for me, my blue Goddess...}
Liara had finished up a late supper and placed some leftovers in the refrigerator for Shepard. She was surprised that the commander wasn't back yet, and she wondered if the team had ended up also going after the assassin this evening. His occupation surely made his recruitment more time sensitive. If they missed him here, there was no way to tell when or where he might surface again. Sighing in disappointment, Liara rounded up some project datapads in the office and headed up to the bedroom, slipping into a nightshirt before she stretched out on the sofa in the corner to get caught up on some of her reading. It wasn't long before the datapads failed to keep her interest enough to prevent her eyelids from dragging closed. The datapad in her hand slipped her grasp and slid to the floor with a soft thunk that did not wake the dozing Asari. Her thoughts strayed from work and her dreams took her to Thessia, once again walking the beach with Shepard. Liara entered the water, and soon Shepard turned and was mesmerized by the sight. Shepard locked on her target and stalked her flighty prey, gliding through the water slowly, silently. Liara was frozen in place by her intense gaze and suddenly Shepard was upon her and had her wrapped in a loving embrace, her fiery kiss and magic hands making Liara's knees go weak. Before she could collapse into the water, she felt Shepard scoop her up and carry her to the beach, gently laying her in the sand. Shepard's touch was intimate and demanding, arousing Liara's pleasure centers and her body wanted to respond; jumping to answer when she heard Shepard's words...

[I love you, Blue... I want to feel you... you are already so wet for me... I want to taste you on my tongue... love you more than anything in the galaxy... I want you to come for me, my blue Goddess...]

With Shepard's last statement, Liara's body shuddered and her hips jerked forward looking for more pressure. Her eyes snapped open, and in a voice husky with sleep she grunted out, "Goddess, Samantha!" Slamming her eyes closed again for just a second, they swirled with the obsidian black of a full meld when they reopened; Liara plunged into Shepard's welcoming mind. She was already panting heavily, and as Shepard thrust her fingers into her core, Liara came hard into her lover's hand, the intensity of her orgasm dragging Shepard suddenly to the precipice. Shepard nipped at Liara's neck folds, and the sharp but gentle drag of her teeth across the folds made Liara's whole body tremble. Shepard then leaned over and locked Liara in a passionate kiss, tongues dancing, with Shepard still maintaining a steady slow rhythm with her thumb and fingers, with the intent of nursing her lover gently through the aftershocks. Liara knew that Samantha hadn't come, so she wrapped one arm around her lover and pulled her in tight for full body contact, her other hand seeking to satisfy the arousal between Samantha's thighs. Their passions and thoughts quickly intertwined and Shepard felt her own body surge in response, careening over the edge and dragging Liara along with her second orgasm in as many minutes. With an exhausted shudder, Liara's head fell back to the pillow, her breath coming in gasps, her eyes closed, and her body quaking with gratifying aftershocks. Shepard gently captured the Asari's lips in another kiss.

[I love the way you taste, Liara]

Liara's melodious laugh vibrated through the meld. [Samantha... you... are... incorrigible!]

Tired, Liara withdrew from the active meld and opened her eyes, crystal clear blues radiating the love she felt for her bondmate. Shepard's green eyes, dark with passion, looked into Liara's soul. She had that trademark lopsided grin on her face as she spoke, "I missed you today."

Liara smiled back at Shepard. "Apparently. I missed you, too. I tried to stay up for you... and," she suddenly realized where they were. "How did I get to bed?"
Samantha smiled. "You were sound asleep on the couch and just purred happily into my neck when I picked you up and carried you to bed... so I cuddled in. I kissed your neck folds and our new automeld kicked in with the contact... I could tell how much you enjoyed it. So I kissed some more... and the rest, as they say, is history."

Liara chuckled softly, "Well, I must admit, that was a very... unique way to wake up, my love. I was dreaming of making love on the Beach on Thessia. In this case, reality is so much better... your timing is impeccable." She reached up and caressed her lover's face, then wrapped her hand around Sam's neck, pulling her down for another passionate kiss, continuing it until they were both breathless. "What time did you get in?"

"Just after midnight." Shepard tugged on Liara's shirt and raised her eyebrows suggestively.

Liara sat up and pulled the nightshirt over her head and cast it to the floor, a seductive smile on her face as she asked, "And what time do you have to get started in the morning?"

Shepard smiled in return, "I don't. I figure I'll hit the Normandy after lunch to make sure the Justicar is settling in OK, but we're not meeting again until tomorrow late afternoon. 4 PM. You'll be pleased to know Judea did great today. She's a good commando; adapts quickly." Shepard leaned over and encircled a blue breast with her tongue and sucked gently, while cupping the other with her hand and gently rolling the tip with her thumb.

Liara groaned and dropped her head back, arching her back in pleasure, somehow still managing a response. "I knew she would, and knowing she was with you allowed me to concentrate on work all day, though I was happy you took Garrus as well." Tears sprang to Liara's eyes. "I just want to get this Shadow Broker situation settled quickly, so I can join you again on the Normandy. I hate the idea of you being out there... apart from me..." Liara finished her statement within the meld, because she was panting and had difficulty speaking aloud. [...] Liara's eyes were closed and a hand ran through Shepard's hair to caress the back of her head.

Shepard's head and hand came up and she gently stroked the Asari's face with the back of her fingers as she responded to her bondmate's fears and desires. "I know, Blue, and we'll deal with it as it comes. You find what information we need and I'll be back as soon as I can to help you... and we'll get it done." She returned her attentions to her lover's body, stroking and teasing different parts until Liara's whole body was humming with pleasure.

Liara collapsed back to the bed and growled with passionate desire. {Goddess, Samantha... I want... I need you... again... inside me... I've got to... ugh!} She didn't need to ask again. As soon as Liara fell back, Shepard slid down her body and wrapped an eager tongue around her clit, sucking and flicking the tip gently while thrusting and curling her fingers into Liara's core. Shepard could feel the muscles clench around her fingers, trying to draw them in farther as Liara's hips bucked off the bed and then set into a steady rhythm, the Asari grunting and moaning in pleasure. Suddenly Liara's body trembled and her hands found Shepard's head and drew her back up, seeking a deep passionate kiss as her eyes went obsidian with a full meld. Shepard's hand kept working while Liara called to her {Samantha! I... need... all... of... you!} and they fell again, together, into the black abyss.

Walls dropped and auras blended anew to an even more radiant teal, and when they returned to the physical world, Liara applied her loving ministrations to Samantha, hitting all her pleasure points and working her bondmate to an equal frenzy. Samantha was busy massaging through the folds of the Asari's crest and Liara had settled into the wet folds between Samantha's thighs, one hand up on a breast, the other established into a quickening rhythm of thrusts, Samantha panting and rumbling in pleasure as two fingers repeatedly penetrated deep within her. Samantha could feel Liara inside her and when the first biotic pulses rolled off the Asari's fingertips, her insides came unglued. She felt the
lightning bolt surge through her entire body and went rigid, climbing to the breaking point. *[Oh my Blue Goddess! I'm... gonna...]* She didn't manage to finish the thought before her body exploded in a powerful release, overflowing Liara's hand. When Samantha's musky goodness hit her tongue Liara felt her own surge and she followed Samantha over the precipice of pleasure, each intensifying the other's orgasm as shared ecstasy claimed them.

As the flying embers burned themselves out and the waves of aftershocks receded, Samantha's arms fell limp at her sides, her limbs feeling too heavy to move, her throat raw from screams she was unaware she'd screamed. Liara dropped the active meld and barely managed to crawl up her lover's side before she collapsed in exhaustion, her head on Samantha's chest, riding the heaving bosom up and down while they both tried to catch their breath. The light meld was even stronger after their second heavy bonding and, even without the active meld, their thoughts moved back and forth freely.

{*By the Goddess, Samantha! Just when I think it can't possibly get any better!*} With the last of her energy, Liara managed to stretch an arm protectively across Shepard's torso.

*{I love you so much, Blue... you make me... whole.}* As her breathing leveled out, Shepard's arms also finally responded, and she was able to soothingly rub Liara's back, careful to not run her fingers into the layers of folds in the hollow of her lower back.

*{Love you... too... must... sleep... now...}* Liara's thoughts became muddled as she drifted on the edge of sleep.

*{Goddess, you're beautiful}* was Sam's last thought as she lovingly kissed the Asari's forehead and followed her bondmate into sleep.

They woke together the next morning, Shepard spooning Liara with an arm wrapped protectively around her lover. Liara hummed with welcome as Shepard took in the comforting scent of eezo and Thessian rose, exhaling softly across Liara's neck folds. They were still linked through the light meld and thought together, *{I want to wake up like this every day...}* Liara stretched languorously and twisted around in Shepard's grasp so she faced her lover, giving her what was supposed to be a chaste kiss on the lips. Admiring the Asari's grace even in a simple stretch, Shepard eagerly took more than was offered and deepened the kiss. A light blush covered Liara's cheeks and she broke off the kiss, laughing, when she heard Samantha's thoughts. *{Dr T'Soni dooms the galaxy with her beautiful grace; making it impossible for Commander Shepard to get out of bed... but rumor has it that both died happily!}* Shepard laughed with her and sat up, flashed Liara a grin and spoke aloud, "You do make me happy, Dr T'Soni. You know that, right?"

Liara sighed in contentment, a dreamy smile on her face as she gently rubbed Shepard's back. "Of course I do, my love. And you certainly know the reverse is true... but we have to save the galaxy, because I plan on spending the next four hundred years with you, not only the next four."

Shepard gave her a quizzical smile, "Only four?"

Liara rolled over and got up, tempting Shepard yet again by reaching for the ceiling and stretching her gorgeous naked blue body in front of her. "Yes, only four. You know, with the galaxy coming to an end and all..."

"Aaargh! Well, since you put it that way..." Shepard resigned herself to actually getting up and she quickly threw on some shorts and her sports bra. Liara was picking up datapads scattered about the floor when Shepard sat on the floor and started doing alternating crunches. Her eyes were closed and she tried to focus on her form and the count. The commander felt out of sorts; her heart rate and body
temperature seemed to rise too quickly, but she kept going, trying to push through it, thinking maybe it was from their strenuous sexual activity overnight.

Liara leaned over to pick up a datapad and, out of the corner of her eye, saw Shepard drop to the floor. Liara's motion slowed and she gradually turned and sat on the couch to watch the commander. In Shepard's peak physical condition, Liara couldn't help but admire the commander's washboard six-pack abs and the lean, strong muscles in her legs. The commander had her fingers laced together behind her head and Liara's focus shifted to the strong shoulders and biceps that surged up and down with every repetition. Her heart started to race when her thoughts ran away... to having those muscular legs intertwined with her own, and those strong arms wrapped around her, holding her close. Liara felt the heat rise in her face and shoot down to her core at the same time a growl escaped her tightening throat, "Goddess!" Datapads again forgotten, Liara was off the couch in a flash.

Shepard felt the surge of heat and lust through the meld just a fraction of a second before she felt Liara's hands hit her chest and their lips crashed together, pinning her to the floor. Shepard's eyes flew open to see not blue, but obsidian, eyes staring back at her as Liara's mind tumbled into her own. An almost savage lust ripped Samantha's breath from her lungs and she was immediately panting and gasping for air, the overwhelming emotion almost frightening in its intensity. In her surprise, Shepard cried out, "Liara!"

Liara's eyes were closed when she wrapped their legs together and ground her already dripping center onto one of Shepard's thighs, one hand kneading Shepard's shoulder and the other fisting some of her hair. She heard Samantha's exclamation and rolled over, placing her lover on top, grunting out words with each drag of her hips along Sam's thigh, "Goddess!... I just... need you... to take me... right... now!"

Having no idea what was really happening, Shepard asked, "What about saving the galaxy?"

Liara grunted in exasperation, and cried through the meld, {Just... ugh... Goddess!... Please!}

Sam leaned in and planted a passionate, prolonged kiss on the Asari's lips and rolled a bit to the side so as to not crush her. She obligingly wrapped one arm around her lover's waist so she could reach the soft folds in the hollow of Liara's lower back and flowed her free fingers through the dripping silken folds between her thighs. Liara's body trembled with anticipation and her hips thrust forward seeking more traction.

{Goddess!... faster... need... more!} Liara released Sam's hair and wrapped her hands around her lover's back, pulling their bodies tighter together and raking her fingernails down Sam's back. Shepard groaned in response to the pain and pressed tighter to the Asari in an effort to escape the nails on her back. She felt Liara's whole body shudder in response to the additional full-body contact and felt her arousal spike through the meld. Liara broke the kiss and rotated her head, purposely baring the crest folds on her neck; Sam tipped her head to angle in and grabbed a fold gently in her teeth while running her tongue along the edge captured in her mouth. At the same time, she turned her lower hand and penetrated Liara with two fingers.

Liara's grunts turned to staccato moans in time with the thrusts and again came a request.

{Goddess, Sam! Please... more... harder!}

Shepard didn't know exactly what she meant; Liara didn't normally like it rough, but based on the Asari's current mood, she meant more of everything, so that's what Sam delivered. She increased the pressure in the lower back folds, released the gentle hold on the neck fold and alternated between bites and hard sucks and then added a third finger to her penetrating hand and increased her thrusting, both in intensity and speed. Suddenly Liara dropped all her barriers and opened herself
completely to the meld; total blackness enveloped them for yet a third time and they found themselves adrift in each other's aura once again, emotions and memories blended in perfect harmony.

Even on this spiritual plane Liara was demanding, closing the distance and enveloping Samantha in a tight embrace as she pressed a passionate kiss to her lips. Unlike their previous experiences, they didn't immediately plunge back to the physical plane upon kissing; instead, they lingered and Samantha noticed portions of her sea-foam green eddies separating from her aura and migrating to the Asari. It was not a temporary phenomenon; they were absorbed and became part of Liara's aura. Just as her eddies and rippling tides moved to Liara, she was accumulating blue embers that danced and floated above the crests of her movements. Each other's auras were starting to pick up not just a color blend, but actual characteristics of the other. Samantha heard Liara through the meld, \[Toward a true unity of spirit...\], just before they lunged from the darkness back into the light.

As they plummeted back to their physical selves, Sam felt everything Liara felt, as if their roles had been reversed. The unexpected surge of sensations almost made her falter, but Shepard quickly refocused and regained her rhythm. Liara's cries rose to a crescendo and her entire body constricted, the strength of the contraction momentarily trapping Shepard's fingers deep in Liara's center, until they both spasmed together with a fierce joint orgasm that lasted for what seemed an eternity.

Shepard withdrew her hands and wrapped her lover tight through the waves of aftershocks. The Asari's face was buried in Samantha's neck, her body wracked by sobs from the extreme emotions coursing through her being. Shepard didn't understand what was wrong and wasn't sure how to comfort her, so just cradled her close and pushed love and affection toward her partner while whispering soothing phrases into her ear, repeated over and over. "I'm here, Blue. I've got you, sweetheart. It's going to be ok."

Somewhere along the way, Liara had dropped the full meld, she wasn't even sure when it happened. After awhile, her sobbing finally subsided; she drew a deep breath, and then let out a shaky sigh. Sam felt the tension flow out of the Asari's body with the exhaled breath. Liara could feel the concern that came through the meld with Samantha's words. \[Blue... what the hell was... that?\]

A nervous laugh accompanied Liara's puzzled response, \[I'm sorry, Samantha, but I have absolutely no idea.\]

\[Whatever it was, it was primal... raw. You really have no idea?\] Shepard's brow was still furrowed, but her unease was fading with time.

Liara shook her head, and kissed Sam's neck. \[No, I don't, but if I had to guess, I'd say the pressure of two years of frustration and fear just exploded. If so, I'm glad to be done with it!\]

Sadness fell over Sam, and Liara felt the great weight it placed on her bondmate as Sam spoke. \[I'm so sorry, Blue. I'm sorry I left you, I'm sorry I took so long to get back... I should have just gotten into the damn escape shuttle with you...\]

Shepard was shocked when Liara cut her off vehemently. \[No! I honestly think had you made it to a pod, anyone with you would have been killed by the Blue Suns when they took you. I wouldn't want you to have to live with that guilt. What's done is done. No more regrets. Let us live for the future now, Samantha... please?\]

Shepard squeezed her tight for just a moment then pushed her away so she could look in her lover's eyes. \[That's a deal, Blue. I love you, and I will live for my future... my future with you.\] Her furrowed brow and frown were replaced by a glowing smile as she cupped Liara's cheeks and placed a loving kiss on her lips.
Liara's eyes drifted closed with the kiss. *(Goddess. How I love you, Samantha! Don't you ever leave me again!)*

They cuddled together for a while in their mutual exhaustion, catching their breath and relishing the comfort of the other's closeness. Eventually, Shepard released her hold on the Asari and climbed to her feet, holding her hand out to Liara. She had an adoring smile on her face as she invited her bondmate to join her. "Come, love. It's time to start a new day."

By the time they got downstairs, Judea and Riana had already eaten breakfast, so Liara and Shepard enjoyed a leisurely brunch while they laid out Shepard's remaining time on Illium. With the Justicar on board, Shepard released Judea from her shadow detail but Liara was adamant about the commander having commando protection. She also wanted Shepard to take two of the Illium commando squad with her full time on the Normandy. Shepard said no, and after a brief animated discussion, finally put her foot down and gave Liara the crew rundown, listing a total ground crew of twelve people, not including Judea. Shepard did promise that if they ran into any difficulties, she would call the Illium commando team lead, Livos Tanni, for back-up. Liara's pout was absolutely adorable, but Shepard managed to hold firm and Liara was eventually forced to accept the commander's decision.

They arranged for Judea to deliver Shepard's personal goods from the crates to her cabin on the Normandy, and then Shepard briefed the three Asari on the protocols and usage of the Salarian burst transmitter. Liara's eyes shined bright at the prospect of being able to communicate to Shepard without Cerberus reading every word, even if the messages had to be short and the timing was somewhat unpredictable. It was getting close to Shepard's departure, and she asked Liara what she'd be doing while the Normandy was off cleaning up the odd jobs and contracts that came with her recruited teammates.

Liara shrugged, "I'll continue with my normal deals to keep my brokerage legitimate. It goes without saying that the Normandy is now a primary client." Liara smiled at the commander as she continued, "If you need any information, I'll provide it as quickly as I can." Her look then hardened as her eyes turned to steel. "Also, Nyxeris had some interesting data hidden away that provided some new leads I need to check out. So, I'll gather information, peel away layers of lies, and shine light into the shadows... and hopefully find that critical piece of data that will tell us where he's hiding."

Shepard ignored the steely eyes and smiled at the determination behind them. "And then we'll go get him, so we can get on with that future we talked about..." She pulled Liara close and wrapped her arms around her bondmate. "Be careful out there, Blue. I have a team of twelve; you use your team of six to protect yourself as you would protect me. I love you, and I'll keep in touch best I can."

Liara's eyes suddenly got big and she pulled back, "Oh, Goddess! I almost forgot!" She turned and ran upstairs, returning with Shepard's journal and dog tags. "We found these on Alchera! I kept them safely in my possession instead of in storage in Armali."

Shepard looked at the journal in amazement and tears came to her eyes. "Oh... Blue... I can't thank you enough for this! How in the world..."

"Actually it was Garrus. He found quite a lot of your personal belongings. He is the one to thank. Though, I did find your tags buried in the snow." Liara placed a hand gently on Shepard's arm and smiled wistfully, "I wore them every day until you came back to me. They kept you close to my heart."

Shepard carefully hung the tags back around Liara's neck before gently cupping her cheeks, "Ionúin álainn, then you must continue to wear them until we are back together full time... it seemed to work out the last time, no sense tempting fate."
Liara blushed and looked away, blinking away tears. Shepard put her hand under Liara's chin and gently guided her head back until their eyes met. "I love you and, as long as it is remotely within my power to do so, I'll always come back for you. I promise." She stepped in and gave one last kiss before leaving. Shepard then turned to the commandos and held out her hands with open palms in the Asari tradition; Judea and Riana each placed a hand atop as Shepard spoke. "Goodbye, my friends. Take care of yourselves and keep my bondmate safe and well." Shepard grinned, "I know that is no easy task, considering she works too hard and tends to fall asleep at her desk. Make sure she comes home and eats... and at least occasionally sleeps in her own bed."

Both commandos laughed and promised to do their best. As Shepard made a final wave and stepped out the door, she heard the chorus whisper, "Goddess be with you, Shepard."
Shepard had certainly enjoyed the night and morning alone with Liara, but she knew at some point it had to end and she needed to refocus on the mission. Once they had departed Illium, her first stop on the Normandy was to visit Samara; Miranda had messaged they had placed her in the Deck 3 Observation Lounge because the Justicar had wanted 'a room that looked out on the great empty void.' As the doorway opened and Shepard stepped in, she noticed the Justicar sitting in the yoga Lotus position, facing out to the stars, obviously meditating. As she approached, she realized Samara was holding a revolving biotic sphere in place, floating in space in front of her chest. Not wanting to disturb her, Shepard took a seat and stared out the same window, contemplating all the missions she'd had that had taken her to many of those stars.

It was not long before Samara spoke. "Shepard. I've spent much of the last four hundred years on my own; it is nice to have a colleague to chat with." She dispersed her biotics and the blue sphere vanished. "I may be rusty at it, however. If you are patient, I would love to talk."

Shepard moved from the lounge chair to take a place on the floor next to Samara. "I didn't have much time to speak with you when we met. How much do you know about our mission?"

Samara flashed a brief smile, "I know you seek to destroy the Collectors and that I've sworn an oath to follow you. That is enough for me."

Shepard was surprised, "Aren't you curious? Don't you want to know why we're after them?"

Samara spoke in all earnestness. "When you live by a code that compels you to harsh action, you learn the dangers of curiosity. If I must kill a man because he has done wrong, do I really wish to know that he is a devoted father? A loving husband?"

Shepard furrowed her brow in thought before answering. "I think you do need to consider those things. I don't see it as so black and white; their good deeds may outweigh the bad they have committed. You need to be able to weigh their total worth before committing them to a permanent solution such as death for a single event. If you don't mind, I'd like to know more about the criminal you were pursuing on Nos Astra."

Samara looked down to the floor briefly before looking back up, but she stared straight ahead and did not look at the commander as she answered. "I hope you will understand if I wish to avoid this topic. It is deeply tied to my code and beliefs. It is very... personal."

Shepard nodded her head in acceptance, "Alright. I can respect that, but I do need to know if it will impact the mission."

Samara was very brief. "It will not."

Shepard nodded again. "Ok. I'll take your word for it. What do you think of Cerberus?"

Samara was much more forthcoming on that topic, "I have heard rumors, but learned long ago to form my own impressions. This is the first time I will have worked with them. I will judge Cerberus by your actions, Commander."

Samara was surprised when Shepard laughed and set the record straight. "If I wear a coat made of varren hide, does it make me a varren? This is a Cerberus vessel, but I am not Cerberus, nor is this a Cerberus mission; as far as I'm concerned, it's a Spectre mission. I have first-hand knowledge of the things Cerberus has done, and I classify them as terrorists. I don't trust them, but they are the only
ones willing to provide me the resources I need to accomplish my mission, so for now they are uncomfortable allies."

Samara smiled and looked at Shepard, "Then it is good I swore my oath to you and not to Cerberus. I work for you, Shepard; our methods may be different, but our goals are not."

Shepard stood up and stepped back. "Unless you have something for me, I should get back to work and let you return to your meditations."

Samara closed her eyes for a brief moment and bowed her head to Shepard. "Perhaps I will have questions after we become a bit better acquainted. For now, I have nothing. Thank you for coming to speak with me... it has been my pleasure, Commander.

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Shepard's next stop was Miranda's office. When the door opened, it appeared as if Miranda and Jacob were having something of a heated discussion, but when the commander told them she could come back, Jacob just glared at the XO and stalked out, saying, "No, we're done here, Commander."

Shepard watched Jacob's back as he hurriedly left the room and the doors closed behind him, then turned and looked questioningly at Miranda. Miranda shook her head, "Sorry, Commander. You shouldn't have seen that. We had... something... once, and Jacob is trying to find closure on some issues. I guess my idea of closure and his are not the same, but don't worry... it won't be a problem."

Shepard looked skeptical, but let it slide. "Ok, but let me know if something changes... before it becomes a problem." With a nod from Miranda, the commander continued, "You have the draft of what you are going to send to TIM?"

"Yes, Shepard, I do. I decided that with all the reporting avenues he has, staying as close to the truth as possible is the best policy; but I'm not giving him full details on all our conversations. I am telling him about our conversation after Horizon, and then your 'slip' when talking to Ms Parasini about Liara being your bondmate. I'll tell him I put those two together, and figured out that if we want to continue to get any semblance of cooperation from you, instead of trying to drive a wedge between the two of you, we need to figure out how to get your relationship on the road to recovery." Miranda handed Shepard the datapad with the draft report on it and smiled, "All to provide 'sufficient motivation' for you to complete the mission, of course."

Shepard's jaw dropped as she read the missive. "You're asking him for help in finding the location of the Shadow Broker?" She looked at Miranda in amazement.

Miranda shrugged. "You know what they say; in for a penny, in for a pound. My guess is he'll provide it, secretly hoping T'Soni is killed in the attempt..." Miranda saw a flash of anger cross the commander's face, "but, obviously, we'll make sure that doesn't happen. Jacob and I clearly won't be able to help, but you have plenty of capable agents on board now. I wouldn't take the Justicar, either."

"I won't necessarily have to take anyone. Liara does have a team of commandos, as you know."

Shepard looked at Miranda thoughtfully. "Though I'll probably take Garrus and Kasumi; a sniper and an infiltrator can compliment any squad." Shepard shook her head and paused for a moment, then looked at the operative, "Thank you, Miranda. I misjudged you. I'm sorry."

"No worries, Commander. It's Cerberus who misjudged you. We should have known that bloody Commander Shepard wouldn't be so easily put into a box." Miranda's smile took away any affront or sting that comment may have carried.
Shepard grinned and shook her head. "Alright, Lawson. Get Mordin and gear up. We leave in an hour to go find our assassin. I'll meet you at the airlock." From the look on Miranda's face, Shepard knew she needed more. "Don't worry... I'm staying on board. Got some things to unpack in my room." Shepard left the XO's office with a smile on her face and a spring in her step that Miranda hadn't seen before. The operative smiled in response to the observation. Yes, T'Soni is exactly who that woman needs.

As the team stepped off the Normandy, they were met by a surprisingly well dressed and well spoken Krogan. "Excuse me. My sources indicate you were in a warehouse recently. Did you by any chance forward a questionable shipping note to a Mr Thax?"

Shepard's hand rested casually on her pistol, but she did not draw it as she spoke. "It looked suspicious, so I passed it on..."

The Krogan nodded. "I'm a representative for Mr Thax. He's very grateful to you." Shepard's hand dropped to her side as the Krogan continued. "Please accept this as a gift for bringing the... shipping irregularities... to his attention."

Shepard willingly accepted the credit chit and handed it to Miranda, then turned back to the Krogan. "Do you need or want help finding the person who cheated Mr Thax?"

The polite Krogan shook his head, "Thank you, but that won't be necessary. Mr Thax will be making a series of polite calls. Hopefully a confrontation will not be required."

Shepard smiled, "Good luck with that. Always better if issues can be solved without violence. Let me know if I can be of any further assistance."

Before he left, the Krogan nodded one last time and acknowledged the commander's offer. "Noted. Have a pleasant day."

As the Krogan turned and walked away, Mordin chimed in. "Surprisingly eloquent and polite. Krogan may have hope yet."

Shepard chuckled lightly and the group made their way to the transportation dock to meet Seryna. On the way, Shepard had to stop and listen in awe; today was the day for surprises and there was a Krogan spouting love poetry, with a very agitated Asari trying to figure out what to do with him. Shepard's curiosity took over, and she couldn't help but speak to the Asari to try and find out what was going on. Her name was Ereba, and she apologized profusely for the actions of the Krogan, hoping he would just go away and stop annoying customers. She was so flustered, she was eager to tell her story and get advice from anyone who was willing. Turned out Ereba had been dating Charr for a while, but they were on a break because he had wanted to get serious, and she wasn't sure what to do. Shepard had to laugh when the Asari said he was a great guy to date, but didn't know if he was long-term material. "Krogans live long lives. It's not like dating a human, where you just stick it out for a century until they die. Uh... oh! No offense!" The Asari blushed when she realized what she had just said.

Shepard smirked and shook her head, telling the Asari she needed to make a decision or Charr was going to drive everyone crazy with his poetry. When she admitted to loving him, Shepard told her the decision was already made, she just needed to realize it. "He obviously dotes on your every move, and you love him. What else is there? You should give him a chance. You're over here worrying about it instead of enjoying the love he's willing to give you. I'd say that's a pretty rare gift from a Krogan."
The Asari looked at the commander for a moment before responding. "I know. Thanks. I appreciate it. I'll talk to him and let him know so he won't bother any more customers." She was smiling as she walked away to go talk to Charr.

Seryna was waiting when they arrived and they immediately departed for the towers. She filled them in on the way, giving them all the data she had on the towers but with a warning that they may have changed some of the protocols after she was fired. She gave them one last warning as they jumped out of the skycar. "Don't linger too long; they'll be here to greet you soon enough."

Seryna wasn't kidding. The skycar hadn't even gotten off the rooftop yet when the team saw unarmed Salarian workers fleeing before security mechs and being gunned down for apparently no reason. The Normandy team made quick work of the two security mechs and their Fenris dogs. One of the Salarians survived and told them a horrid tale of Nassana's ruthlessness, their only crime being not getting out of the building fast enough. After treating the Salarian's injuries, the team got in the elevator and started their climb to the tower bridge.

When the elevator topped out and they stepped out, the floor was crawling with mercenaries. Shepard immediately shifted gears into Vanguard mode and began her 'crash and blast' routine that Miranda had gotten accustomed to, protecting the commander's flank best she could. Mordin had yet to see her in full attack mode, so was initially caught off balance, but he recovered quickly and the team started to develop a rhythm. Miranda was warping shields, Mordin burning armor, and the commander charged in and sent enemies flying. Shepard worked at taking down an opposing Vanguard and had to recover quickly to fight off an encroaching Fenris mech. The Fenris charged in and knocked the commander back a couple of steps as she blasted it with her shotgun. Before she was able to step away, a merc launched a rocket at her, dropped her shields and staggered her so she could not retreat from the Fenris. As the Fenris 'died' at her feet, it exploded; with her shields down, Shepard took the full brunt of the explosion and she collapsed to her knees as her world went gray.

With shaking hands, she activated her medigel dispenser and waited for her vision to clear.

Miranda cussed under her breath and warped the rocket merc into nonexistence, moving to stand protectively over the commander as she recovered. "Mordin! Shepard's down! Protect her right flank while I handle frontal assaults!"

Mordin immediately swung out to the right and promptly incinerated two mercenaries trying to swing to the exposed flank and Miranda blasted away with her SMG, forcing the remaining two mercenaries to seek cover. She wanted to access her supply of hypo-spray for Shepard, but the mercenaries were closing too fast for Miranda to spare any of her focus.

Across Illium, Liara had just locked up the office and was turning to start down the stairs when she felt a crushing weight in her chest and her vision blurred. She staggered, and stumbled against the vacant assistant's desk for support while she tried to catch her breath. Riana had already advanced down the stairs to make sure the way was clear when she heard the unusual noise behind her. Stopping and glancing back up the stairs, she saw Liara in obvious distress and bolted up to her.

Riana looked with great concern at the very pale Asari before her, "Mistress! What ails you?"

Liara swallowed hard and shook her head in confusion, "I don't..." Realization dawned before she finished speaking and instead of saying she didn't know, she exclaimed, "Goddess! Shepard!" She immediately pulled up a tracking program on her omni-tool and it showed her Shepard's location and vitals from the data feed Liara had installed in her armor.
Riana looked at Liara quizzically, wondering how she could have possibly known the commander was in trouble. Liara sat at the desk and watched the data feed roll across her display and contemplated what was happening; if she could feel Shepard, then it made sense that Shepard could feel her. From the tracking program, she realized the team was halfway across Nos Astra, and there was no way to get to her in time to assist with the current crisis, so she concentrated on sending supportive thoughts at the commander. *I give you my strength, my love. Take from it what you need.* Liara monitored the vitals on her omnitool and was relieved as she watched them eventually level out.

Shepard felt a push at the back of her mind and was at first disoriented, but then realized what it was and smiled in spite of the situation. She took a deep breath and opened her mind to let warmth and strength flow into her body and soul; her hands quit shaking and her vision cleared almost immediately. After just a couple of moments, she stood up and surprised even Miranda with the extent and speed of her recovery. Looking the XO in the face and grinning, she said, "Let's finish this!" With that, she pulled her biotics and charged; one merc and two mechs later, they were at a doorway that opened up to the next section of the building. It was a repeat of every other section they had moved into. A few mercenaries, a few mechs and they moved into a long glass hallway that took them to the next section. It became painfully obvious to Shepard just how much money Nassana Dantius had made on her illegal activities with the size of the mercenary army they had to face. Mechs and mercenaries didn't come cheap, and there were a lot of both! Every room was a battle and finally after fifteen minutes of constant fighting they caught a break. They had cleared the entire floor and now had to take an elevator. Shepard was pretty sure it wasn't going to come down empty, so she encouraged everyone to get into cover so they could ambush whoever showed up. However, before she called the elevator down with whatever enemies inside, Shepard typed a very short omni-direct message to Liara. *Felt you. Thank you. Better than medigel any day. Love.* She concentrated on the light meld in the back of her mind and pushed thoughts of love and affection as she pressed the send key on her omnitool.

With everyone in cover, Shepard hit the elevator call button. When the doors opened, it wasn't as bad as Shepard expected it to be; it was only a Krogan and two mercenaries. Between Miranda's warp, Mordin's incinerate and Shepard's shotgun carnage, the Krogan was down in the first volley. The first merc went down quickly, and Shepard finished the second with a quick crash and blast. They were on the elevator in no time and headed upward once more. When the doors opened, there was an Eclipse trooper on the radio talking about not hearing from a number of their teams. Shepard was surprised Krios had left the guy standing because he wasn't very observant. The team of three walked right up on him, and he had no idea they were there until Shepard spoke to him. He wasn't very forthcoming with information, because he had none to give. Thane Krios was very good at what he did, and even with an entire mercenary army, they couldn't find him within the confines of only two office buildings. Shepard actually felt sorry for the merc and told him to leave quickly, before she changed her mind, and he wasted no time departing the area. As the team started to move through the new level, they actually found the datadisk with the Kirosa genetic record; there was going to be one happy Salarian when Shepard returned it to him in the shipping office.

First up was a huge warehouse style room with more of the standard fare of mercenaries, mechs and Fenris dogs. After cleaning house, they opened a locked storage room and released yet more workers. Shepard had to wonder; they had apparently been locked in by Thane, and the commander was curious as to the assassin's motivations. It seemed he had gone out of his way to avoid civilian casualties. Shepard sent them toward the exit and moved on through the warehousing floor. On the far side of the room, a ramp climbed to the next level. At the base of the ramp was a communications terminal and Shepard heard a familiar voice... that of Nassana Dantius. She was a bit panicked, wondering where everyone was and looking unsuccessfully for a report from her mercenaries. Shepard
was more than happy to respond to her inquiries. "I'm afraid your men aren't able to respond, Nassana."

The team ascended the ramp, wiped out the few mercs and mechs at the top, and realized they were finally at the bridge level. The bridge itself was interesting; there was a number of mercs, including two Vanguards. It should have been more challenging, but Shepard's 'crash and blast' was particularly effective because the bridge was so narrow. Her encounters were more crash and fall, because the force of her collision tossed her enemies from the bridge and there was no need to shoot them as they plunged multiple stories to the ground. The biggest problems were the two large automated rocket targeting drones sitting in the upper stories of the second tower. Shepard used the same strategy on those as she used on the big Krogan in the elevator; combined fire. Using Mordin's incinerate and Miranda's overload, Shepard was able to finish them off with her SMG loaded with incendiary ammo; really would have been nice to have Garrus along. His powerful sniper would have taken them down in just a few shots.

The end was near; the team had been in a near constant gun battle for almost a full hour as they had worked their way up through the Dantius Towers and they were all tired. Just two more Vanguards once they reached the second tower and they were finally at Nassana's door. As they walked in, Shepard quickly surveyed the situation; Nassana had only held back two mercs and her personal commando with her in the control room, though Shepard imagined they were probably her top three agents. Even so, they all looked very nervous when the supposedly dead Spectre walked into the room. Nassana spun around and spoke first. "Wait. Before you kill me, just tell me who hired you."

Shepard just shook her head in disgust. "I'm not an assassin, Nassana. But I am looking for one."

Nassana was skeptical, "You break in here and decimate my security just to find the person who's here to kill me? What are you playing at, Shepard?"

The commando suddenly interrupted, stating she heard something. Nassana wasn't happy; cursing and telling her guards to check the other entrances. She spun back and pointed at Shepard, "You... stay put. When I'm finished dealing with this nuisance, you and I are going to..."

Nassana didn't finish as a Drell, who Shepard assumed was Thane Krios, dropped from the ceiling and promptly dispatched the two mercs, the first by twisting and breaking his neck, the second with a quick spin and punch to the throat, caving in his windpipe. He used the second merc as a shield as he drew his weapon and shot the solo commando at close range. He then moved like lightening and grabbed Nassana, spun her around and planted the barrel of the same pistol into Nassana's chest. He pulled the trigger and then gently leaned Nassana across the large control console she was standing behind and crossed her arms and hands carefully over her chest in death. Krios immediately holstered his pistol and folded his hands in prayer. Having watched the entire attack unfold before them, Miranda was the first to speak, and she spoke with admiration, "Not bad," with appreciation of the assassin's skill evident in her tone.

Miranda and Mordin kept their weapons trained on the assassin while Shepard assessed Krios for a brief moment before speaking. "I was hoping to talk to you."

Krios spoke very quietly, "I apologize, but prayers for the wicked must not be forsaken."

Shepard snorted, "Well, she certainly was wicked."

The assassin surprised her when he responded, "Not for her. For me. The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone. Take you, for instance. All this destruction... chaos."

Thane paused for a moment before he continued, "I was curious to see how far you'd go to find me. Well... here I am." Thane walked up and stopped directly in front of Shepard, paying no attention at
all to the two supporting team members with weapons trained on him.

Shepard very calmly queried, "How'd you know I was even coming at all?"

Thane walked past Shepard and stood calmly in front of the barrel of Mordin's pistol. "I didn't. Not until you marched in the front door and started shooting. Nassana had become paranoid. You saw the strength of her ground force. She believed one of her sisters would kill her. You were a valuable distraction."

Shepard shook her head. "It would be nice to be a distraction instead of the main event for a change, but let's cut to the chase. I need you for a mission. You familiar with the Collectors?"

Thane replied, "Indeed. But only by reputation," and fell silent once more.

Shepard crossed her arms and continued, explaining about the abductions and the intent to go through the Omega-4 relay to the Collector homeworld.

That actually got Thane's attention and he spun to the commander, "No ship has ever returned from doing so."

Shepard shrugged, "So we'll be the first. They say it's a suicide mission… I intend to prove them wrong."

Thane got contemplative for a moment, speaking more to himself at first, "A suicide mission... yes. A suicide mission will do nicely." He then looked at the commander as he finished. "I'm dying. Low survival odds don't concern me. The abduction of innocent colonists does. I will join your crew, Commander, no charge. The universe is a dark place. I'm trying to make it brighter before I die."

Shepard stuck out her hand, "Glad to have you aboard, Thane. Your skills will be a huge benefit, and I'm looking forward to working with you."

As the group turned to leave and head back to the Normandy, Miranda reached out and halted Shepard; Mordin and Thane stopped to wait. The operative once again managed to surprise the commander. "Shepard... the armor retrofits won't be done until lunchtime tomorrow. It always was slated for a three day job." When Shepard didn't show any signs of understanding, Lawson was blunt. "Oh, for God's sake. Go to the bloody apartment, Shepard! We don't know how long it will be before you'll get back here again. Mordin and I can get Mr Krios back to the Normandy and settled in. Just be back on board before noon."

Shepard's eyes got big as understanding finally set in. With a big smile on her face, the commander whispered, "Thanks, Miranda. I owe you one," and took off at a light jog toward the housing district. Miranda laughed and got back on the move toward the Normandy. Mordin looked at Miranda as if contemplating saying something, then thought better of it and fell in behind her and Thane.

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Shepard was less than five steps into the darkened apartment when she was frozen in stasis and had a pistol set to her temple. A quick flash of panic set in as she wondered if a Shadow Broker assassin had found Liara before she had found the Shadow Broker. As the lights came up slightly, Riana cursed under her breath and released the commander under a profuse litany of apologies. Even though her heart was racing, Shepard turned to the chagrined huntress in acknowledgement. "Thanks, Riana, for not having a shoot-first, ask questions later policy!" At Riana's stricken look, Shepard had to laugh as she clapped the huntress on the shoulder. "Seriously, it does my heart good to know you are so vigilant in protecting my bondmate. Don't ever lose that edge."
They were both saved from further awkwardness by Liara flying down the steps into Shepard's embrace, after being woken from her slumber by her bondmate's flash of panic through their new connection. "Shepard! What are you doing here?" Liara then blushed as she continued, "Not that I'm complaining!"

"Well, the armor refits won't be done until lunch tomorrow, and we finished up the assassin recruitment mission... and, well, Miranda threw me off the Normandy." She smiled as she watched the look of wonderment cross the Asari's face. "Yes, my XO directed me to come spend more time with you while I could, since we don't know when we'll get back here again."

Liara's eyebrow markings rose. She looked at Riana and thanked her, following with a wink and a brief statement as she took the commander's hand. "I'll take care of our trespasser from here..." She then spoke to Shepard as they climbed the steps, "Given the circumstances, you really should have messaged you were coming home. It would have saved all of... that."

Shepard grinned, "How do you know I wasn't testing your security?"

Liara wheeled on her in all seriousness, "Shepard, don't you dare! It could have gotten you killed! I just thank the Goddess it was Riana on duty and not one of the younger commandos. I'm not sure how they would have reacted."

Shepard looked at her bondmate with remorse and pulled her into an embrace. "I'm sorry, love. I shouldn't jest about things like that." Shepard cupped the Asari's cheek and took Liara's lips softly in her own in a gentle and sincere apology. When she broke away, she walked to the corner of the room and started shedding her armor.

Liara came to assist and it wasn't long before she gasped, "Samantha! You didn't go see Karin after your mission, did you?" Shepard sheepishly shook her head no as Liara slowly peeled the commander's under-armor liner off her explosion reddened and bruised skin. Without asking, Liara turned on the water and hung a clean towel, then helped the commander finish getting undressed before taking her hand and leading her to the shower. Once Shepard was in, Liara quickly stripped and slid in behind her, taking the bath sponge and carefully cleansing all of the commander's newest battle wounds. There was nothing major, her nanites had already started repairing much of the damage; it was more a matter of removing the blood and grime from the surface wounds so the skin could start to repair itself as well.

"So what exactly happened? It looks like you walked through fire..." No matter how careful and gentle Liara tried to be, Shepard's skin was extremely sensitive to touch and the commander hissed as Liara cleansed the burn.

Shepard told her about the Fenris exploding literally at her feet with no shields active. The commander was very curious about the strength of their new link and had to ask, "So, how did you know something was wrong?"

"Ha! How did I know? How could I not? I was just locking up the office when I suddenly couldn't breathe. Even across the meld, that explosion nearly knocked me off my feet. I've never seen Riana move so fast; she was up the stairs and at my side in an instant. At first I had no idea what was going on and then it dawned on me there was only one thing even remotely possible." Liara shook her head, remembering the wonder she felt at the realization. "I pulled up your vitals tracker on my omnitool and confirmed my suspicions. You were too far away to physically provide you timely aid, so I did the only thing I could; I opened myself to you and offered stability and strength of spirit."

Shepard relaxed against the cool wall of the shower and stared at the wondrous being before her. "You have no idea what that did for me, do you?" Between the worshiping gaze and the awe in
Samantha's voice as she asked the question, Liara could do nothing but stare at the floor and blush. Shepard went on to explain how easily she recovered from the blast and how quickly her biotics came back to full strength. They turned off the water and the scientist in Liara came forward; they discussed the implications while they carefully patted Samantha dry, careful to not drag the towel across any of the particularly sensitive regions and burns. Once they were both completely dried off, they retreated to the bed where Shepard stretched out flat while Liara sat astraddle, gently smearing a thin sheen of medigel across all of her burns.

Shepard softly massaged Liara's thighs while receiving the tender ministrations. With her rate of regeneration, the majority of the symptoms would probably fade within the hour, but the medigel provided instant relief. She closed her eyes and reveled in the caresses that played softly across her cheeks, her forehead, and her chin. She felt herself drifting to sleep, so she spoke to stay awake and asked a random question that wandered across her consciousness. "Li? How did you get my vitals tracker on your omnitool?"

Liara grinned mischievously, "I modified the built in transmitter in your armor to hack into the feed that goes to the Normandy. I just want to be able to keep track of you, love."

"You know Edi will find that, don't you?" Shepard just shook her head as she asked the obvious.

Liara laughed. "Of course she did, almost immediately, but Joker vouched for me. We had a very nice conversation before she informed me it was only a local transmitter, so once you left the system it would no longer work." Liara's brow furrowed before she continued. "I believe she does not want me to be disappointed when the feed cuts off when you head out again. Very... considerate... for an AI."

Sam sighed and a contented smile spread across her face. "Every day, you amaze me, Dr T'Soni. I wonder if this is all some magnificent dream and I'm going to wake up to find I'm ten years old and you're part of a story my mother and I made up the night before." She pried her eyelids open at the sound of a husky throated chuckle.

Liara was smiling down at her, a look of raw passion seated deep in her eyes. Her voice was rough as she spoke. "Trust me, Commander, this is no dream. I know your mother, and she would never talk about THIS to her ten-year-old daughter." With that, Liara leaned forward and kissed Samantha with a fervor born of pure desire that shot electricity throughout her body. Samantha's mind jumped from sleepy to seduction in a flash, and even as she felt her clit throb and the wet heat build in her core she was sure her mind was making promises her body wouldn't be able to keep; she was tired from the fight and realized she hadn't eaten dinner to replace any of the energy burned by the use of her biotics.

Because of the light meld, Liara 'heard' Samantha's reservations and her answer thought came through loud and clear, {Oh, my dear commander, you really must take better care of yourself...}, but Liara didn't pause for a second in the attentions she was lavishing on Shepard's body. {Join with me, Samantha. I have energy for the both of us...}

Shepard opened her mind, let herself be consumed by the black abyss, and rode the waves of passion with much more stamina than she herself possessed. The calm sea climbed to a raging storm and after many repetitions the tempest abated and the tide rolled out, Liara's fire was finally quenched and she collapsed contentedly into Samantha's arms to sleep.

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When Shepard awoke the next morning, she immediately sensed Liara's presence and knew something was amiss. {Liara? What's wrong?}
Liara choked back a sob before she attempted to answer the question. *This... physical craving. I... it's different than it has been before. I'm having... urges I can't control. You used a word I think fits perfectly... primal. You touch me and I immediately want to meld and be... physical. To the point where I can't stop myself!* Samantha felt the heat and Liara's embarrassment surge through the link.

*I'll admit, your recent sexual... aggressiveness... is different, but what about that is frightening?* Shepard was honestly confused, and Liara immediately recognized it and knew she needed to explain more fully.

*Goddess, Samantha! I don't know where it's coming from!* Even though distraught, Liara had to chuckle at the absurdity of that statement. *Well, that's not entirely true. I know where it comes from, you're amazing and I love you! But the unexplained lack of control... it is very unlike me... and...* Liara's mood swung from humor to despair as her fear returned, and her whole body shuddered as her mind froze in terror.

Shepard crushed the Asari to her, wrapped her tightly in her arms and pushed comfort and security through the meld to her lover. *Hey! There's nothing we can't solve together! What has you so frightened, my love, that you can't even give voice to it?* Samantha stroked Liara's crest folds and massaged her back in an endeavor to relax her enough to speak.

*By the Goddess! Asari and uncontrollable urges! I'm a p-p... pureblood!* Liara gasped as if in pain and burst into wracking sobs against Samantha's chest. Complete understanding of the extent of Liara's fear erupted in Shepard's mind and she actually laughed out loud, throwing Liara's mind into complete confusion and making her cry even harder. *Dr Liara T'Soni! There is absolutely, positively, no way under the sun you are an Ardat-Yakshi! All the times we've made love, you have never harmed me in any manner, shape or form! There is obviously another explanation; we just need to figure out what it is! Put your research skills to work, Info Broker!* Shepard pressed a hard kiss to the top of Liara's head and loosened her grip so Liara could pull away if she wished.

Liara's breath hitched a number of times as she tried to control her sobs and her rampant emotions. *By the Goddess, Samantha. I love you, but please do not laugh at my fears. They are so very real to me!*

*Oh, Blue! I'm sorry... I don't mean it that way at all. I'm not laughing at your fear! I would never do that to you. I'm laughing in relief, because I know to the deepest part of my soul that you aren't an Ardat-Yakshi! There is something else at work here. Something to do with the depth of our relationship, I know it. Perhaps we're pushing you to early matronhood? Why don't you ask Sha'ira?* Shepard pushed Liara away so she could look in those gorgeous radiant blue eyes once again. Though still lacking their usual brightness, Sam was relieved to see some of the cloudiness had gone.

Liara closed her eyes to shield herself from the commander's studious gaze and took a deep calming breath as she felt the backs of Samantha's fingers brush tenderly across her cheek. *That, my love, is*
an excellent idea. If I was not so confused and frightened by all this, I would have thought of that. I should have thought of that! Just another reason why I need you." Liara paused for a moment and reopened her eyes, looking lovingly into Shepard's face before speaking softly, "Thank you, Samantha."

"You..." Shepard leaned in and kissed the tip of Liara's nose, "...are very welcome, my beautiful Blue." She smiled at a more relaxed Asari, literally feeling the waves of stress fall away. "Now. Do you have any more of those urges you need me to sate before I head back to the Normandy?" Shepard's smile spread into a wide grin as the Asari before her blushed ferociously and she felt the rush of desire scream through the meld...
Once back on board, Shepard dropped stuff off in her cabin then headed down to talk to Karin about Liara. The doctor had no insights, and agreed that Sha'ira was probably the best bet, since Matriarch Benezia was obviously not an option. Karin saw the pain cross the commander's face when she spoke of Liara's mother and had to say something. "I'm sorry, Commander. I didn't mean to open old wounds, but the mother figures prominently in the development of their young in Asari society. Liara is lacking that influence and, painful to discuss or not, she'll need to find someone to basically act as a surrogate. Given Liara's relationship with Sha'ira, I'm sure the consort will provide her the proper guidance, assuming she doesn't offer to take over the role herself. I think it was an excellent suggestion on your part."

Shepard offered a weak smile in response. "Yeah... I'm just sure there's more to this issue than just sexual urges; I'm sure it has something to do with the change between life stages. I'm curious if our relationship is pushing her into the Matron stage early, and if it has any adverse side effects."

"Well, I can certainly make some discreet inquiries into the matter for you. See if there is any open source information out there." Karin placed a calming hand on Shepard's shoulder. "As you told Liara. We'll figure it out."

"You're right." Shepard stood and smiled at the doctor. "Thanks, Karin. Now. I've got to see Miranda. We're about ready to pull chocks and I have no idea where we're headed!"

Bursting with news she knew the Councilor was going to cringe at, Aethyta was surprisingly patient while waiting for Tevos to come on the line. She briefly thought about calling Mozia and making it a conference vid but Tevos finally picked up, putting an end to her contemplations.

"Aethyta. A pleasure, as always." Tevos wore a wide smile, leading Aethyta to believe she either just had some excellent sex or finished a negotiation to her great benefit. Aethyta beamed back at the councilor when struck by the sudden thought that those two items were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Aethyta considered giving her a hard time about it but opted out, given the revelations she was about to lay on the poor Asari. "Yeah. You won't think that after I tell you what I know." She watched Tevos' smile flatten as her lips pursed. "Shepard and the Normandy are going through final preparations to depart, as we speak. She picked up two additional crew here. A Drell assassin and a Justicar."

Tevos could not keep the surprise off her face as she blurted, "What?"

"You heard me. It's worse than the Normandy SR-1. Eclectic is an understatement. She has a Salarian, a convict, a mercenary, the Turian, a Krogan...and now a Drell and a damned Justicar. Who, by the way, swore the Third Oath of Subsumation to Shepard."

"Thank the Goddess for that, else most of the crew would be dead within the week! But to swear to a human!" Tevos shook her head in awe. "I knew when I met her, Shepard was special, but to receive the Oath of a Justicar..."

"Right?" Aethyta growled out the rest, "And that's not all I found out. Her mission? She's planning to go after the Collectors... through the Omega-4 relay."
Tevos' face blanched. "That's... not possible. No one's ever returned!"

"Tell me about it, but I wouldn't count Shepard out. We've done that once before and look what happened. But I'm still glad she's got the Justicar and not my kid on that ship." Aethyta waited for the Councilor to say something but was greeted only by silence. "Tevos?"

"Oh. Yes. Sorry. That's a bit of a... shock, to say the least. We absolutely must keep Liara off that ship. Is Mozia aware?" Tevos furrowed her brow, trying hard to see a way through the issue but finding no immediate answers.

"No, haven't told her yet. All I know is if Shepard dies this time, she better stay dead or I'll kill her myself for hurting my girl again." Aethyta suddenly smiled. "I gotta like her though. She did right by my girl this visit. Liara's all sunshine and rainbows, practically glowing. If she was older I'd swear she was pregnant."

Tevos snapped her head up at that statement. "She's not, is she? She is the last of her line, and we cannot let her risk herself that way. She's too young!"

Thyta barked out a laugh. "Don't worry yourself over that one. I can tell by her crests she hasn't even started the change yet. She couldn't get pregnant right now if she tried. Course, if they keep fuckin' like they obviously are right now, it might prompt the change early." Aethyta laughed again and had a huge grin on her face. "Ha! That's my girl!"

As the door slid open, Miranda glanced up and smiled. "Ah, Commander. Good to see you back. I take it everything is in order?"

Shepard smiled at her XO, still amazed at the change the three days on Illium had wrought. "Yeah, Miranda. Everything's great. So. Where to next?"

"Grunt is exhibiting excessive aggressiveness and is tearing up the cargo hold while complaining about 'not feeling right.' I've talked to Dr Chakwas and Mordin both, and they both feel it is some type of chemical or hormonal imbalance, but neither one knows enough about juvenile Krogan to treat it. So, based on their recommendation, we're off to Tuchanka before he rips a hole in the hull. Karin figured you could talk to Wrex about it and at least get some ideas, if not get him treated."

Shepard shrugged. "Unless we've gotten something else from TIM, it's as good a destination as any and I look forward to seeing Wrex again, anyhow. Make it so, XO. I'm going to do a ship walk and spend some more time with the new kids. How much time do I have?"

"Tuchanka? Probably three days or so. We'll go through the Wastes and the Serpent Nebula. Any reason to hit up the Citadel?" Miranda raised her eyebrows in query.

"Not at the moment, but I'll let you know if anything comes up between now and then. Thanks, Miranda!" Shepard stood up and headed to the door, but turned back to the operative one last time before departing. "Miranda, I mean it. Thanks. For everything."

Miranda actually blushed a little as she spoke, obviously discomfited by earnest expressions of gratitude. "Of course, Shepard. My pleasure."

Shepard walked out onto the deck and already felt the ship in motion as the doors closed behind her. Her next stop was in Life Support to chat with Thane Krios. As she walked in, she was surprised that Thane sat with his back to the door. Without looking, he asked if she needed anything, to which Shepard replied, "I don't want to interrupt if you are praying or meditating, just say so and I'll return..."
later. Do you have time to talk?"

Thane was very accommodating, "Certainly. We haven't had a chance since I joined."

Shepard coughed. "Um, yeah. My fault. Personal business on Illium. Sorry about that."

Thane turned to face her. "Do not apologize for that, Commander. Life is too short. I wish I had taken more time for such things when it was available to me." He paused only momentarily before continuing. "I told you I am dying. I have a Drell specific disease, Kepral's syndrome. It's not communicable even to other Drell, but it is most definitely fatal. It inhibits my ability to absorb oxygen into my blood and eventually I will suffocate. They are working on a cure, but I doubt my body will still draw breath by the time they find it. I do not begrudge you any time you can spend with your loved ones."

Shepard wasn't quite sure what to say, but felt Thane was not one for empty platitudes and said so before asking if there was anything she or the Normandy crew could do for him. Thane nodded. "You would be correct in assuming I do not care for pity. I have done many evil things in my life and am looking to restore some balance to my existence before I return to the oceans. Your mission, should we be successful, will go a long way toward that end. I appreciate the opportunity to participate. Other than that, providing me a dry room such as this will ease my symptoms and prolong my time by some small amount. There is nothing else I require." Thane turned back away and resumed his contemplative posture.

Shepard took the hint and said her farewells. "Right. I'll let you get back to it. If you need anything, Thane, please don't hesitate to contact me." Answered by silence, Shepard left the room and headed off to find Kasumi.

Initially, she was as good humored and evasive as always, but eventually a more somber mood overtook the enigmatic thief. "Shep, do you know about the task Cerberus promised me help on?"
Shepard had to admit she had heard nothing on such an arrangement, but promised her support whether or not Cerberus had agreed to it. "Thanks, but I'm not sure yet how to do what I need. I'm working on a plan, and I'll let you know when I figure it out. Long and short of it is my partner was killed and his graybox was stolen. I want to recover it. I just need some time to nail down the details. I've taken the liberty of getting you some evening wear that will hopefully meet your approval. You'll want to look presentable."

Shepard nodded. "Sounds simple enough. Just let me know, Kasumi. We'll take care of it. As for the evening wear, I'm a tux kinda gal, no gowns... and dress boots, no heels."

Kasumi actually pouted. "I'd say perfect, but it'd be a lie. Guess we need to swing by the Citadel so I can exchange it. Shame. You would have been ravishing in what I selected."

Shepard laughed. "Don't exchange it. I'll tuck it in my closet for an emergency. Let Operative Lawson know what it cost you and she'll reimburse you for it."

At that, Kasumi broke out in a light musical laughter. "Shep, remember who you're talking to. It didn't cost me a thing!"

Shepard's eyes got big, and her mouth opened, but closed again without uttering a single word. She just shook her head, not wanting to know, and walked out of the room with a smile on her face, informing Miranda they needed to swing through the Citadel on the way to Tuchanka. She wove her way down to engineering, and finally managed to locate Jack on the sub-deck below engineering. She had a stack of data pads lying around her feet and looked up at the sound of Shepard's feet hitting the decking.
"Hey. Thanks for letting me see these files." Jack was perched comfortably on a cot, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, reading through the datapads.

Shepard just shrugged. "My end of the bargain. Tell me about you, Jack."

Jack waived one of the datapads at her, "I'm still finding out about me. Your friends at Cerberus are into some nasty things. I'll find something in here eventually. I just know it."

"Well, they're not exactly my friends. They're just the only ones who are willing to give me what I need to go after the Collectors. As an organization, they're terrorists; as individuals, not all of them are bad and I try to judge each on their own merit." Shepard watched as Jack stood and started to pace like a caged beast.

"Yeah, well, they raised me at a research facility and I'll kill anyone associated with that place. I escaped when I was a kid and been on the run ever since... and they've been chasing me ever since. But soon it's going to be their turn. I'm going to chase them."

Shepard shook her head. "I can't begin to understand what you went through, but make sure the anger doesn't eat you from the inside out. There's more to life than revenge."

Jack glared at her, "I go to sleep with this. I wake up with it. Everyone I kill? I pretend it's someone who worked at that facility."

"Sounds like maybe you catch a lot of innocents in the crossfire. What about killing fascinates you so much?" Shepard wasn't keen on having such a loose cannon on the crew.

Jack stopped pacing and looked directly at the commander, "I figure every time someone dies and it's not me, my chances of survival go up."

Shepard scowled. "Just remember everyone on this crew is here to help keep you alive, at least until the mission is done. After that, everyone goes their own separate way. Don't go looking for a fight with anyone on board, and we won't have any problems."

As she turned and started up the stairs, she heard Jack mumbling to herself, "No promises, girl scout." Shepard chose to ignore it and proceeded to her cabin to draft up some messages.

When she got to her cabin she slipped into her jeans and boots and let out a sigh of relief before digging Mordin's comm device out of hiding. She then grabbed a datapad and started to type.

Shepard had been gone less than a day when Liara got her first burst transmission. It was as Sam said it would be, short and to the point but it made her want to laugh and cry at the same time.


Liara pictured Shepard in her jeans and boots and smiled, even as the void she felt in her soul echoed the disconnect from her bondmate. Without thinking, her hand rose to her heart and her fingers traced the outline of the dog tags under her shirt. She typed out a quick message on her omnitool and pressed 'send' as a single tear of lonesomeness slipped unchecked down her cheek.

Shepard had planned on swinging by the embassies to visit Anderson and Tevos, but as they docked
she got a call from Joker; the Consort was requesting an audience. As she prepared to go ashore, she was even more surprised when Kelly Chambers notified her that her guest had arrived. Shepard hustled to the airlock and welcomed Sha'ira to the Normandy. "Sha'ira, this is a bit unexpected... twice over, actually. First that you contacted me at all, and second that you are here and not receiving me at your office."

"Yes, well, I appreciate you making time to see me, Commander. I take it it is no inconvenience, and I am not keeping you from any formal duties here at the Citadel?" Sha'ira smiled as only she could and glanced around. "This is a beautiful ship, Commander. I assume there is somewhere we can speak privately."

Shepard smiled in return, noting Sha'ira's last statement was just that, a statement, and not a question. She offered her arm and escorted the Consort to the Port Observation Deck, knowing Kasumi was out roaming. As they entered, the Consort started to speak, but Shepard stopped her with a brief gesture.

"Edi, privacy mode please, until I say otherwise." Upon receiving acknowledgement of her order, Shepard looked to Sha'ira, "You were saying?"

"I received a somewhat cryptic note from a trusted source that demanded immediate action. It told me you would be here and I was to pass on this message... please share with Sha'ira and have her contact me once she knows the details." Sha'ira stopped speaking and merely waited for the commander to react.

Shepard laughed. "That little minx. I assume this is from Liara?" With the Consort's confirmation, Shepard told the basics of the story and then offered to meld to share the true depth of what was happening between them. After the meld, Sha'ira rose and walked to the bar.

Without looking at the commander, Sha'ira leaned on the counter for support. "May we partake of refreshments, Shepard?"

Shepard swung behind the bar and grabbed some Elasa, poured two glasses and handed one to her visitor. "Sorry. I'm a poor hostess; should have offered to begin with. But if you think we need alcohol, I fear our discussion is going to be less... pleasant... than I anticipated."

Sha'ira laughed, "Oh no! I didn't mean to worry you. It's just that this is unprecedented. It hasn't happened in ages, and never with any non-Asari that I know of. Your openness to our ways, particularly your strength of mind and ability to navigate within a meld is a crucial factor, but you still amaze me, Commander."

Shepard scrunched up her face. "Ok, confused human here. What's going on, and what does my openness to melding have to do with any of this?"

Sha'ira shook her head. "Sorry, let me explain in full. It is rare to find both partners open enough to a full melding to experience a true union, even more so when one of the partners is non-Asari, such as you have done with Liara. On top of that you need to have a strong sense of your spiritual self; so much so that you believe in higher planes of existence. Many people claim to have faith, but few truly believe." Sha'ira took a sip of Elasa and looked at Shepard, ensuring she was still following. With a nod from the commander, she continued.

"So, you started with an intellectual rapport and then you developed an emotional bond which eventually grew into a physical relationship. These three steps are frequently completed by couples and essential to any long-term pairing. What makes you and Liara special are the trials you have gone through; first together, then apart, and finally your efforts to get back together again. The
strength of the love and trust that pulled you two back together was the final key ingredient. When you both dropped all your pretenses, all your walls, all your barriers and truly opened to each other, you opened the doorway to a greater bond. Your belief is what allowed something magical to begin, an actual blending of auras, a true blending of spirit. If you did not truly believe in a higher purpose and other planes of existence, you never would have even seen Liara's aura, much less been able to touch it or interact with it. There are those who can see auras and there are those who cannot; the door simply would not have opened." Another sip, another nod, and Sha'ira continued her explanation.

"Liara came closer to the truth than she realized when she mentioned a true unity of spirit. She instinctually understood what was happening but did not have the knowledge to put a name to it. When you reach the pinnacle of the blending, you reach a state of union called Inanna. Once there you will be able to communicate without words, without touch; I always assumed this required two Asari because of our natural ability to meld, but you have proven that is not the case. Your souls and spirits can act as one, a whole much greater than the sum of its parts. You have found your perfect soul mate and your stars are rising to that pinnacle of existence." Sha'ira tipped her glass and polished off the remaining Elasa.

Shepard sat in silence for a moment, digesting everything the Consort told her. She had an expression of bewildered awareness when she finally spoke, "When Liara first explained the Asari union to me, she finished by saying it could sometimes be a truly life-changing event. Back then, I said it sounded almost mystical. Little did I know!" Shepard laughed lightly and looked to Sha'ira as she asked her next query, "So, what causes the primal sex urge? It's uncharacteristic for Liara, and she can't seem to control it. That's the part that scares her... the lack of control."

Sha'ira smiled broadly. "That's the easy part. Just as Liara instinctually understood what was happening on the intellectual level, so did her body at the physical level. Her body is merely encouraging her to finish the process. The more spiritual melds you experience, the more cohesive your unity becomes. That's why you experienced greater levels of connection after each joining. First it was just emotion, then thought, then without touch, and then distance... all the way to the relay! Goddess knows how strong you can make it, but knowing you two, you'll push the limits if given enough time." Sha'ira paused and let out a comforting laugh, "The primal urges will taper off naturally once you reach some sort of equilibrium. Based on your imagery from your last encounter, I would say you are very close. It truly is nothing of concern."

Shepard blushed and downed the rest of her Elasa as well. "Thank you, Sha'ira. As always, your wisdom is recognized and your willingness to share it is greatly appreciated."

Sha'ira embraced the commander and whispered suggestively in her ear, "Seeing you is always to my pleasure, Shepard. You shall never be a stranger at my door."

Shepard smiled as they separated and said with a smirk, "You know that's not going to happen any time in the near future."

Sha'ira laughed in return, "Ah, young love. I am Asari. I have time and patience. I can wait." Laughing together, they continued to make small talk as Shepard escorted Sha'ira back to the airlock, arm-in-arm.

As they separated, the Consort leaned in and kissed Shepard chastely on the cheek. "Thank you for your wonderful hospitality, Commander. I will handle this with the utmost discretion; I'll send a quick note to say we've met, and I'll head to Illium and share our discussion in person. I think it's best."

Shepard smiled, "Yes, I agree. Even with everything that has happened, she can still be extremely
shy and evasive. It's harder for her to dodge when you are sitting on her couch. The twinkle in Shepard's eye let Sha'ira know she had seen her last trip to Illium in Liara's memories through the meld.

A wink later, Sha'ira was out on the docks. She looked back one last time at the commander, smiling as she said her final farewell. "Goddess be with you, Shepard." With that, she turned and was gone.

As soon as Shepard reentered the Normandy, Kelly Chambers informed her that Professor Solus was looking for her and said he had urgent news. She immediately swung around and headed for the lab; as was typical, Mordin began speaking the minute Shepard entered. "Shepard. Important news. Know you're busy. Have to deal with the Collectors. Planning attack. Too important to wait. Just received data, still processing, analyzing likely scenarios. Not sure how to begin. Too much intel. You remember our talk? My work on Genophage modification?"

"Yes, you stopped the Krogan adaptation to prevent a population explosion." Shepard remembered being surprised by the Krogan genetic variability.

"Part of a team; scientists, all different types. Blood Pack mercenaries captured former team member, Maelon. Last seen on Tuchanka. Might torture him. Make an example." Mordin dropped his head as he finished. "Recovering Maelon would be a personal favor to me."

"Mordin. Do you think they found out your team updated the Genophage?" Shepard could only imagine how badly things would go for Maelon if that was the case.

The Salarian's head came back up and he looked at Shepard as he answered. "Unclear. No way to determine until we get to Tuchanka."

Shepard nodded, "Don't worry. We're on our way there now to speak to Urdnot Wrex about Grunt's condition. We'll see if we can find Maelon while we're there."

Mordin looked relieved. "Convenient. Appreciate it. My assistant. My student. Want to see him safe. Maelon last seen outside Urdnot territory. Scouts might have seen Blood Pack. We can talk to clan chief."

As soon as they touched down on Tuchanka and the team emerged from the shuttle, Shepard had to laugh. The Krogan from Illium had actually brought Ereba to Tuchanka and was standing there extolling on the virtues of his beautiful planet. Shepard coughed and looked down at the ground when she heard Ereba reply, "I guess. It seems a bit dirty, though..."

Shepard continued down the steps toward the entrance to the bunker and the Overcaptain jerked the barrel of his shotgun at Shepard. "Stop right there, alien. You're Shepard... of the Normandy. The clan leader wants to speak with you. Talk to him soon, alien. If we decide you're not welcome, you'll know just before we kill you."

Shepard laughed. "Yeah, in your dreams. Wrex is my Krantt. However unsuccessful you would be, he undoubtedly would still take exception to you trying." Shepard signaled Mordin and Grunt, and they pushed by the Overcaptain as if they didn't have a care in the world. As they moved deeper into the facility, Edi informed them of references to a captured Salarian in the Chief Scout's logs. Shepard just shook her head, not wanting to know how Edi got the information. As they entered the central hub for Clan Urdnot, the group was stopped by a guard, telling them they had to wait to be
summoned by the clan leader. He had barely gotten the words out of his mouth before Wrex barreled over, "Shepard! My friend! You look well for dead! I should have known the Void couldn't hold you."

Shepard smiled up at the big Krogan as they gripped forearms in greeting. "Good to see you too, Wrex! Clan Chief. Nice! Sounds like we've got stories to swap over some Ryncol, but later. Got business to take care of first."

After basic preliminaries, the two warriors discussed the dual purposes behind the visit, and Wrex pointed them first to the head scout. Wasn't long and they were talking to the lead mechanic. He gave them one of the clan's Tomkah trucks and told them to be careful with it. They only had one more in reserve, and that was down for maintenance...the last crew returned the truck minus a combustion manifold. The team was then on their way to pay a visit to Clan Weyrloc, holed up in an old hospital. Shepard had been told about the level of devastation on the Krogan homeworld; it was another thing entirely to see it in person. Looking at the wanton destruction along the route, she was surprised it was habitable at all. Once at their destination and out of the truck, the first things they encountered were insectoids called Klixen. They were fire-breathers, so while Mordin was busy slapping them with cryogenics, Shepard was busy throwing warps and Grunt was happy using his shotgun. Since they tended to explode when they died, coating everything next to them with flaming goo, Shepard worked at range and opted out of her usual 'crash and blast' approach.

After the Klixen were varren and then Vorcha, which incendiary ammunition handled very nicely. Grunt was very happy, having an outlet for his raging hormones as he dived into the fray in full melee mode. As they progressed up to the level of the Blood Pack headquarters, they finally ran into their first Krogan warrior. She'd heard it before, but just the enthusiasm with which Mordin yelled, "Incinerate! Burns through any armor!" always made her laugh. There ended up being only two warriors, along with a couple more varren and a couple more Vorcha before they finally got to the final battle field before the hospital entrance. Grunt found it disappointing, with just a few Vorcha for him to stomp through before finding himself at the door of the hospital. Shepard made him wait while she and Mordin pulled a combustion manifold off an upended Tomkah; the mechanic would be pleased when they returned not only their truck, but spare parts for the second one.

Shepard was not pleased when the first thing they found after they entered the hospital was a dead human; especially when Mordin announced he was a victim of experimentation because humans are genetically diverse, making them perfect subjects to test various treatment modalities. Shepard growled, "What the hell were they testing for?"

Mordin did some additional scans before answering, "Modifying hormone levels. Counterattack on glands hit by Genophage. Clever. Conceptually sound"

Shepard grimaced and her eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. "Clever, my ass. Now we've got two reasons to shut this place down." Signaling to the team, they pressed further into the facility. They came to a door and when it opened, they stepped into a large chamber with a ramp to the right that led up to a balcony directly in front of them. A large Krogan stepped up, with others behind him; Shepard couldn't see exactly how many because of the balcony's elevation.

"I am the speaker for Clan Weyrloc. You have shed our blood. By rights, you should be dead already." As the Krogan approached closer to the railing, Shepard saw there were only three of them. The Krogan continued, "But Weyrloc Guld, the Chief of Chiefs, has ordered that you be given leave to flee and spread the message of our coming."

Shepard thought that odd, and just had to ask, "Krogan don't generally let people go. What does Clan Weyrloc have planned?"
The Clanspeaker paced as he delivered his message. "If you walk away now, you can tell your children that you saw Clan Weyrloc before our Blood Pack conquered the stars. You think the Urdnot impressive? They are pitiful. Weyrloc Guld will destroy them! The Salarian will cure the Genophage and Clan Weyrloc will spread across the galaxy in a sea of blood!"

Mordin whispered to the commander, "Appears they discovered Maelon's work. Unfortunate."

Shepard stepped forward and tried to reason with the speaker, "It doesn't have to happen like this. I can understand wanting to cure the Genophage..."

The angry Krogan cut her off, shouting, "No, human! You understand nothing! You have not seen the piles of children that never lived! The Krogan were wronged! We will make it right, and we will have our revenge!"

Shepard refused to give up, trying to continue the argument. "Half the galaxy sees you as victims. You start a war and you'll lose that support!"

The Krogan laughed. "Ha! We have the Blood Pack and we have the Salarian! When our clan numbers in the millions, we will not need support. When we cure the Genophage, Weyrloc Guld will rule all Krogan and form the new Krogan Empire!"

Shepard shook her head. "Why do we always have to do things the hard way? We simply can't let you run rampant across the galaxy!"

The Clanspeaker bellowed his response. "If you lack the wisdom to flee, then you will be the first of billions to be crushed beneath our might! For Weyrloc Guld! Attack!"

The door behind the speaker flew open and Krogan and Vorcha poured out. Grunt immediately broke right, aiming for the ramp up, and Mordin launched an incineration attack. Shepard dived for cover and then launched a warp followed by incineration rounds from her SMG. She worked her way across the cover until she was within charging distance of the ramp and turned into a blue bolt of lightning, quickly catching up to Grunt by smashing into the Krogan he was fighting, finishing him off. Grunt let out a bellow of laughter and moved to his next target with glee. Mordin kept on the move doing what he did best, alternating between cryo blasts and weapons fire, shattering his frozen targets into thousands of pieces. It didn't take them long to clear the room.

As they moved up the ramp and entered the secured portion of the facility, they began to smell chemicals and death. When they entered the first lab they found, Mordin located a terminal and downloaded some information from the first stages of research, commenting on its thoroughness.

Shepard scorned Mordin's tone, "Most people would be so casual about developing a sterility plaque, Mordin."

Mordin shook his head, "Not meant to sterilize, meant to stabilize. And not developing, modifying. Much more difficult working within confines of existing Genophage. A hundred times the complexity. Errors unacceptable. Mistakes could be worse than doing nothing. Goal was to keep Krogan population stable, optimal growth."

Shepard couldn't accept Mordin's arguments. "Still, you're working in shades of gray. You caused stillbirths in the millions. A lot of people consider that murder."

"Look at what happened to Tuchanka as a result of the Genophage, Mordin. You still think you did the right thing?" Shepard didn't think he could so easily shake off the mantle of responsibility for his actions.

Mordin only shrugged, "State of Tuchanka not due to Genophage. Nuclear winter caused by Krogan before Salarians made first contact. Krogan choices. Refused truce during Krogan Rebellions. Expanded after Rachni Wars. Refused to negotiate. Conventional war too risky. Krogan forces too strong. Genophage was only option. Us or them. No apologies for winning. Wouldn't have minded peaceful solution."

Shepard sighed. "Neither of us was there, so we are both subject to our own species' perceptions. But I agree, peaceful would have been nice. Let's get moving."

Across the hall and in another section of the lab, the team came across a dead female Krogan. Mordin picked up a datapad, read it and looked over the corpse. "Sterile Weyrloc female willing to risk experimental procedures. Hoped for cure. Pointless. Pointless waste of life."

Shepard was definitely confused and questioned why Mordin would be disturbed by the effects of the work he so adamantly defended. Mordin was actually shocked by Shepard's assumption. "What? Why? Because of Genophage work? Irrelevant. No, causative! Never experimented on live Krogan. Never killed with medicine! Her death not my work, only reaction to it. Goal was to stabilize population. Never wanted this. Can see it logically... but still unnecessary. Foolish waste of life. Hate to see it."

"Too much talking. Let's move, Shepard!" Grunt was pacing like a caged animal, so Shepard decided continuing the philosophical argument would have to wait and pressed on. They found a lot of empty rooms as they continued to move through the halls, and then they were surprised. They found the Krogan scout sitting in a room with the corpse of another Krogan. When the door opened, the scout looked up in amazement. "You killed the Blood Pack guards."

Shepard looked at him, "The chief scout told us to watch for you. We've taken out the guards, get back to Urdnot."

The obviously sick scout looked at the floor as he answered, "I can't. The Weyrloc did things to me. Drugs. Injections. Said I was sacrificing for the good of all Krogan. Experiments to cure the Genophage. Everything's blurry. Hard to think. Have to stay. This is my fault. I got caught. Wasn't strong enough, not good enough."

Grunt bellowed. "You worthless pyjak! Those experiments are for Weyrloc, not Urdnot. You are a clan traitor!"

The sick scout struggled, but managed to stand up. "No! They said I was helping Urdnot!"

Grunt laughed. "So you're a stupid pyjak! If you truly want to help your clan, you'll get your worthless hump back to Urdnot and act like a real Krogan!"

The sick scout looked at Grunt. "I am not worthless! I can do it. I'm up and I'm going back to camp!"

Shepard growled at the scout, "Damn right you are! Get back to Urdnot and show them what you're worth! Go!"

After the scout roared and headed out, Shepard looked over at his teammate. "Thanks, Grunt. That was just what he needed!"

Grunt growled, "I wasn't helping. If he didn't get up and move I was going to kill the traitor where he
Shepard and Mordin looked at each other; Mordin shrugged, and Shepard said, "On that note, I think we'd better keep moving!"

As they rolled through the next doorway, they found a large chasm with two bridges crossing it. On the far side were a number of Blood Pack Vorcha troopers and a few Krogan. With Grunt charging in like a maniac and Mordin throwing cryo blasts, there was remarkably little for Shepard to do but clean-up work. It was totally inappropriate, but she laughed to herself when she thought how Liara would encourage her to keep a hormonally charged juvenile Krogan on the crew at all times if it kept her from leading from the front.

They cleared the level, crossed one of the bridges and moved down a ramp on the far side to the next level. A few more Blood Pack Warriors and a couple of Krogan later, the clan leader Weyrloc Guld showed his face. He was a bit tougher to take down; he had both barriers and upgraded armor as compared to the standard warriors, but he was still no match for the Normandy team. Mordin set him up for failure with a cryo blast, after which Shepard charged in and shattered him with a blast from her shotgun. Once Guld was down, they had the run of the facility and quickly found the lab where Maelon was working.

Mordin was shocked and confused when he walked into the room. "Maelon. Alive. Unharmed. No signs of restraint. No evidence of torture. Don't understand."

Maelon's tone was derisive. "For such a smart man, Professor, you always had trouble seeing evidence that disagreed with your preconceptions. How long will it take you to admit that I'm here because I wish to be here?"

Shepard looked at Mordin. "He wasn't kidnapped. He came here voluntarily to cure the Genophage."

Mordin was definitely in denial, "Impossible. Whole team agreed! Project necessary!"

Maelon shifted from derisive to sarcastic, "How was I supposed to disagree with the great Doctor Solus? I was your student! I looked up to you!"

Keeping time with Maelon's shifts, Mordin went from denial to anger and accusation. "Experiments performed here. Live subjects! Prisoners! Torture and executions. Your doing?"

Maelon was not repentant. "Yes! We've already got the blood of millions on our hands, Doctor. If it takes a bit more to put things right, I can deal with that!"

Shepard couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You believe what you did here is justified?"

Maelon grunted in disgust. "We committed cultural genocide! Nothing I do will ever be justified! The experiments are monstrous... because I was taught to be a monster."

Shepard looked at Mordin. She didn't agree with the Genophage, but didn't believe Mordin capable of anything like this. "Did you ever perform experiments like this?"

Mordin was horrified, "No!" His gaze shifted to his student. "Never taught you this, Maelon."

Maelon ranted on, "So your hands are clean? What does it matter if the ground is stained with the blood of millions! You taught me the end justified the means. I will undo what we did, Professor. The only way I know how."
Shepard shook her head in frustration. "This isn't getting us anywhere, Mordin. Maelon clearly doesn't need rescuing. What do you want to do?"

Mordin's answer was simple. "Have to end this."

Maelon wasn't ready to let it go. "You can't face the truth, can you? Can't admit your brilliant mind led you to commit an atrocity!" Unexpectedly, Maelon pulled a pistol and aimed it at the group.

Grunt growled, "Shepard?" When Maelon looked toward the Krogan, Mordin jumped forward and struck Maelon, taking the pistol from him and pointing it back at the student.

"Unacceptable experiments. Unacceptable goals. Won't change. No choice. Have to kill you."

Shepard exclaimed, "Wait!" She took a step toward the professor, "You don't have to do this, Mordin. You're not a murderer."

Mordin hesitated. "No, not a murderer, but must stop him. Just like Rana Thanoptis."

Shepard winced at the comparison, but it was accurate. "Yes, like Rana, but not like at Okeer's lab; more like Virmire. I gave her a second chance; you should do the same for Maelon. Everyone makes mistakes. Give him a chance to learn from it. If he screws up a second time... well... I won't stop you again."

Mordin hesitated, and then dropped the barrel of the pistol. "Thank you, Shepard. Finished, Maelon. Get out. No Weyrloc left. Project over."

Shepard looked at Maelon. "You heard the professor. Get out before he changes his mind."

Maelon started walking but couldn't resist a parting shot. "The Krogan didn't deserve what we did to them. The Genophage needs to end."

Mordin shook his head. "Not like this." He turned his attention to Shepard. "Maelon's research only loose end. Could destroy it. Still valuable, though."

Shepard's forehead wrinkled in contemplation. "Valuable? If you think it could still be useful, why not hang on to it? Better to have it and not use it than to need it and not have it."

Mordin nodded his head. "Point taken, Shepard. Capturing data, wiping local copy. Still years away from cure, but closer than starting from scratch. Done. Ready to go. Ready to be off Tuchanka. Anywhere else. Maybe somewhere sunny."

Shepard agreed with him, but they still had business to attend to with Grunt.

Mordin glanced at his teammate. "Agreed. Grunt helped me, even if I misunderstood mission parameters. Will stay and help him. Only fair."

Shepard smiled. "Alright. Let's get back to Urdnot."
The Harder They Fall

Grunt grumbled the entire time during the ride back to Urdnot, looking out the window of the Tomkah in disgust. "This is the great Krogan homeworld? This is the land of Kredak, Shiagur, and Veeoll? This chunk of rock is barely worth standing on! Never thought I'd miss the tank."

Shepard looked at the young Krogan and sighed. "That's why they need you, Grunt. The Krogan were proud once; much more than the thugs for hire they are now. Wrex is a great Krogan and he's trying to change that, but he'll face a lot of opposition along the way. He'll need allies that want to look to the future; improve the lot of the Krogan without destroying worlds in the process."

Grunt showed his teeth with a feral grin, "But still willing to fight and take out anyone who gets in the way of progress. That'll be me."

Shepard nodded in agreement. "That'll be us."

When they finally reached Urdnot and jumped out of the truck, the Chief Mechanic nodded in approval, "You're not bad for a Human, Shepard. Brought back my Tomkah in good shape, along with spare parts for the one those pyjaks brought back broke. Shows respect, and you saved me a good day's work. My vehicles are yours if I have one available when you need it." After thanking the mechanic for the loaner, they group headed up to chat with Wrex about Grunt's condition.

"Yeah, I noticed him earlier. He's a juvenile with no clan markings. Without clan, he's a waste of a hump." Wrex gestured and Grunt approached the clan leader. "Where are you from, whelp? Was your clan destroyed before you could learn what was expected of you?"

Grunt showed no fear and spoke directly. "I have no clan. I was tank-bred by Warlord Okeer; my line distilled from Kredak, Moro, Shiagur..."

An allied clan leader, Gatatog Uvenk, stepped in and interrupted, "You recite warlords, but you are the offspring of a syringe!"

Grunt wasn't impressed and continued, "I am pure Krogan. You should be in awe."

Wrex looked at Grunt with a critical eye, weighing options as he spoke. "Okeer is a very old name. A very hated name."

Grunt looked him in the eye, "He is dead."

Wrex was not surprised, "Of course he is. You're with Shepard. How could he be alive?"

Shepard spoke from the side, "I need Grunt back up to speed, Wrex. What's wrong with him?"

Wrex glanced over and shrugged. "Nothing. He's a juvenile ready to become an adult. He needs to undergo the Rite of Passage."

When Wrex mentioned the Rite, Uvenk barged off in disgust. "Too far, Wrex! Your clan may rule, but this thing is not Krogan!"

Wrex let Uvenk stalk off like a child throwing a tantrum with only a side comment of, "idiot," and then turned his attention back to the whelp in front of him. "So, Grunt. Do you wish to stand with Urdnot?"
Shepard stepped up, "What is this Rite of Passage? What does it require?"

Wrex shook his head, "Not for me to say, Shepard. Should Grunt accept, the shaman will discuss it."

"Uvenk seemed pretty adamant." Shepard wanted to know where Wrex saw Grunt fitting into the clan. "You'll let a tank-bred Krogan join the clan?"

Wrex was deadly earnest when he answered, "Only because he's with you. After all, you and I killed thousands like him. But because he is with you, I assume he is free of outside influences. Clan Urdnot is strong and the others will do as I say. They see the benefit of my vision."

"What happens if he doesn't complete the Rite?" Shepard frowned and crossed her arms over her chest in a defensive posture, staring at Wrex.

Wrex was straight up and answered honestly, "The clanless are not respected; a tank-bred probably even less so. If he stayed here, he would be killed." He looked back to Grunt as he continued, "His disposition is what it is, Rite or no. That's just him being Krogan. Okeer didn't tell you that in the tank, did he, boy?"

Grunt looked around, "It is in my blood. It is what I am for and Shepard speaks highly of you. I will stand with Urdnot."

Wrex nodded with approval with a quick glance at Shepard before continuing, "Good boy. Speak with the shaman; he's over on the second level. Give him a good show and he'll set you on the path." Wrex moved back to his dais and looked at the commander over his shoulder, "You too, Shepard. How many times have you stepped in a mess for your crew, hmmm?"

"Only as many times as I've needed to, Wrex. Thanks. We'll see you when you have a new member of Urdnot."

Wrex laughed as he sat down, "Sure of yourself, as always. Good to know dying didn't change you. Hunt well, Shepard."

The group worked their way up to the second level where Wrex had indicated the shaman would be. As they walked in, Uvenk was already there bending his ear and the shaman was having none of it. "You go beyond yourself, Gatatog Uvenk! The rites of Urdnot are dominant!"

Uvenk growled back, "How do we know it will challenge him? He's unnatural! The beasts of the Rite could ignore him like a lump of plastic!"

The shaman dismissed Uvenk's concerns, "They know blood no matter the womb. Your barking does not help your case."

Grunt stepped up, fearless in the face of opposition, "I'll speak for myself!"

The shaman turned to the newcomer and stepped up to him, "This is the tank-bred? It is very lifelike. Smells correct as well. Your protests ring hollow, Uvenk."

"Urdnot Wrex has given us permission to seek clan status for Grunt." Shepard stood ready to deflect any challenges.

The shaman grunted in displeasure, "Permission. Hmph. Good enough, but lacking in spirit."

Uvenk growled, "If this must stand on ritual, then I invoke a denial! My Krantt stands against him! He has no one!"
The shaman narrowed his eyes, "My patience is tested, but Uvenk invokes correctly. Grunt, who is your Krantt? Your allies willing to kill and die on your behalf?"

Shepard laughed, "You think we're here for decoration? We stand with Grunt as shipmates and comrades in arms. Grunt is my Krantt."

Uvenk was still pissing and moaning about the whole affair, "Aliens don't know strength! My followers are true Krogan. Everything about this whelp is a lie!"

Shepard had enough of Uvenk's protests and without thinking, she suddenly lunged forward and headbutted Uvenk, much to his surprise, following it up with, "What the hell is your problem?"

The shaman barked out a laugh, "I like you, Human. You understand our ways and know when words are no longer enough."

Uvenk glared, "Shaman! You cannot decide in his favor. What about Krogan tradition if you pollute the Rite?"

At that point, the shaman had enough of Uvenk's disrespect. "You...you dare! I was a warrior before you mother was born! I speak with the authority of centuries! I decide who is worthy; that is the end of it!"

Again, Uvenk stalked off, grumbling as he went. "I have other means to oppose this."

The shaman looked at Shepard with approval, "You have provoked them. Reason enough for me to like you. They're your problem now."

Shepard was now all business. "What do we need for the Rite?"

The shaman answered quickly, "To begin the Rite, only the candidate and his Krantt are required. You love battle, do you not? The last gasp of a dying opponent? Bring your love of the fight, Shepard, and Grunt will succeed."

Shepard gestured over her shoulder, "Is Uvenk gonna be a problem?"

The shaman shrugged, "He is forbidden to interfere, but with the tank-bred, he still believes this is not a true test. He may not obey tradition. During the Rite of Passage, you must be ready for anything, Shepard. From what you've shown me, you will not disappoint."

Shepard nodded. "We're ready. Let's do this."

The shaman smiled and answered, "Eeeexcellent!"

The shaman drove them to the site and when they arrived and climbed out of the Tomkah, he started explaining. "This is Tuchanka's most recent scar, the last city to fall during the rebellions. The keystone was at the heart. It has survived wars and the passage of the centuries. It endures... like the Krogan."

As they emerged from the garage, the team looked around and saw they were in a large circular arena with towers and barricades placed somewhat haphazardly within. Three sets of steps led to a lower level that surrounded the platform on the three sides, a solid barrier rising to the heavens on the forth, with a tall tower in the center of it.
The shaman continued, as they walked to center stage. "If you wish to join Clan Urdnot, you must contemplate the keystone and its trials."

Grunt asked what was going to happen and the shaman answered, "Who knows? You must adapt. You must thrive no matter the situation. Any true Krogan will. Once I depart and close the gate, you must press the keystone to begin the Rite." With that, he was gone.

Grunt was eager and pulled his shotgun, looking at his leader. "Let's get started, Shepard. Hit the keystone."

Shepard readied her SMG and, with a nod of readiness from Mordin, activated the keystone. A voice immediately rang out, "First the Krogan conquered Tuchanka...and mastered a natural world only we are fit to hold." As the voice went on, the tower at the center of the wall drew a large hammer to the top, contained within the tower's surrounding cage of metal. Once it reached the top, the hammer dropped, crashing to the bottom and sending out a resounding boom as it struck a large plate at the base, signaling the start of the Rite.

Almost immediately, Grunt called out, "Here they come! I'm ready!" as he charged toward the approaching varren.

*Varren? Really?* Shepard called up her biotics, and in a flash of blue smashed into her first target, finishing it off with gunfire. Between waves, Shepard rotated her weapon to the shotgun and they finished the varren off in no time, the attacking packs not large enough to provide much of a challenge.

After three waves of attacking varren, Grunt looked around the now quiet arena. "There! These beasts know I am worthy!" As things stayed quiet, he looked at Shepard. "We must need to hit the keystone to start the next round. Let's do it!"

Shepard laughed at the young Krogan's eagerness as she returned to the wall to watch the hammer get drawn up for a second drop. The voice spoke again, "Then the Krogan were lifted to the stars to destroy the fears of a galaxy, an enemy only we could chase to their lair." With the resounding boom, Shepard halfway expected to see Rachni, so was pleasantly surprised when it turned out to be only Klixen crawlers. Crash and blast wasn't going to work so well against an explosive, incendiary enemy, so she threw a warp at the first target and swapped back to her SMG with cryo ammo. They quickly fell into a pattern, with Shepard and Mordin hitting them with cryo effects and Grunt shattering them with his shotgun. By the last wave of Klixen, sheer numbers made the task more difficult and keeping the enemy at range proved difficult. The Klixen started flanking them and attacked from all three open sides, limiting the team's mobility. More than once, one of the teammates, Shepard included, ended up killing one up close and got caught in a fiery explosion when the Klixen died. As the arena once again grew quiet, Shepard directed the team to tend their wounds and replace their medigel stores from the multiple med kits scattered about the battle complex. Mordin quickly complied, but Grunt didn't bother, instead urging Shepard to once again activate the keystone.

When Shepard hesitated to make sure Mordin was ready, Grunt got impatient. "Come on, Shepard! Hit the keystone!"

Shepard stopped dead in her tracks and stared at the young Krogan. "Patience, Grunt. You need your Krantt healthy. Any strong warrior can attack enemies. A smart warrior knows how to best attack his enemies. If you are going to help lead the Krogan to their future, you need to be stronger, faster and *smarter* than the rest. Strength and speed will earn you a place. Learn to also fight *wisely* and it will make you a leader." She stood firm and waited for him to acknowledge that he heard her.
He stared back at her for a few moments before dropping his eyes. He finally did and spoke solemnly, "Understood, Battlemaster. I realize the tank did not impart practical knowledge. I stand ready to learn the right ways to use my strength."

Shepard planted a huge grin on her face as she punched him in the shoulder. "Alright! That's my boy! Now we're ready for the next wave!" With that, she jogged over and punched the keystone. The hammer rose yet again and the voice spoke, "Now all Krogan bear the Genophage, our reward, our curse. It is a fight where the only goal is survival!"

As the hammer fell and sent out its shockwave, the tremors it caused did not stop and the ground continued to shake. What? I'm sure we don't have to survive an earthquake... Shepard narrowed her eyed and looked around, wondering what new enemy awaited them. Her unasked question was answered as the next beast raised its tentacled head. Shepard's brain snapped into gear and her feet started moving as she cried out, "Thresher Maw!"

Mordin's favorite battle cry rang out, "Incinerate! Will burn through any armor!" as he began to launch repetitive incineration tech attacks, punctuated with his own SMG fire with incendiary ammo.

Shepard launched a warp as she tripped her ammo over from cryo to incendiary as well, at no time letting her feet stop. It was essential, being on foot, they keep away from the acid spit of the Maw; it would burn through their armor like it was paper. She called out to her team, "Keep on the move and stay away from one another! It can't aim at three of us at once! One dodging means there's still two of us always shooting!"

After the team got a few good shots in, the Maw dived back into the ground and moved to a new location. Easy enough to track by watching the dirt fly up from its passage, they were more than ready when it reappeared, and they resumed fire. It vanished again and the pattern repeated a few more times; the team continuing their incessant barrage whenever it showed itself. After four or five Maw appearances over the course of only two minutes, the team stood victorious. Shepard drew a deep breath of relief when she returned to the keystone and it indicated the Rite was complete. She hadn't wanted to contemplate what could have possibly been involved with a fourth round. As she was preparing to hit the button on last time to call the shaman, Grunt called out, "We have company. Good. I want more."

Shepard looked to Grunt and saw the direction of his gaze. When she followed it, she saw a ship settling down just outside the arena and when its door opened, Uvenk appeared. He walked to the arena with his warriors and stepped up onto a wall, pacing as he spoke. "You live, and you brought down the thresher maw. No one has done that in generations. Urdnot Wrex was the last."

Grunt looked at him with pride, "My Krantt gave me strength beyond my genes, which are damned good."

Uvenk jumped down from the wall and approached Grunt. "True, your aliens displayed the skills of a good Krantt. I wonder...you say you are pure? Okeer constructed you? No alien meddling?"

Shepard looked at Grunt as she spoke, "The best Krogan traits are distilled into Grunt. He's designed to be perfect."

Uvenk shook his head, "You outsiders do not understand. Being designed is the problem. He is unnatural. But not made by aliens and being truly powerful. That is a tolerable loophole."

Shepard frowned. "A loophole for what?"

Uvenk glared at Shepard, still chafing under the alien's interference in Krogan matters. "A reason to
accept him. He is a mistake, but his potential could tip the current balance of the clans."

Shepard sneered, "He is no mistake. I am Grunt's Krantt as Wrex is mine. You would dishonor that?"

Uvenk did not have a chance to respond before Grunt answered as well. "You spit on my father's name! On Shepard's name! But now you stop ranting because I'm strong? Now you want me in Gatatog?"

Uvenk nodded, "With restrictions. You could not breed, of course. Or serve on an alien ship. But you'd be clan in name."

Shepard growled, "Clan in name is not clan. You talk like he's a thing, a trophy. You're just after his power. You don't really want him."

Uvenk agreed, waving his hand in dismissal. "Of course not. I didn't want to cooperate with Urdnot either, but I had to. Clan Gatatog is on the brink...either of greatness or of destruction. I get traditional support if I fight him and reformer support if I back him. His Rite of Passage tipped that balance to reform."

Shepard turned in disgust to Grunt. "I'll give you my advice if you ask, but it sounds like Uvenk is offering you an easy job. It's your choice, Grunt."

Grunt shook his head, "That's the problem; I was not born for easy. I am pure Krogan. Uvenk, you are the pretender! I choose Urdnot."

Uvenk spit out, "Your head is valuable whether you're alive or dead!"

Grunt drew his shotgun in a flash and pointed it at Uvenk, taunting him. "Just try to take it!"

With a quick glance, Shepard and Grunt broke for cover. Mordin, who had stayed back out of the conversation, launched an incineration attack at Uvenk then also moved to cover to start the fight in earnest. After a threshersh maw, Uvenk and his troops posed little challenge. Mordin and Shepard focused on the support troops and let Grunt handle Uvenk. Shepard kept an eye on him, just to make sure nothing ill befell the young Krogan, but she did not need to worry; Grunt handled himself just fine. She and Mordin walked over and watched the end of the fight as Uvenk fell to not rise again. Grunt turned to them and roared, "Uvenk is meat!" He looked at Shepard and growled in pleasure, "Let's signal at the keystone to get out of here, and leave him to rot."

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The shaman greeted them by throwing his arms open wide and greeting Grunt. "You have completed the Rite of Passage, earning the honor of clan and name." As he continued, Grunt knelt down in front of him and bowed his head. "Many survive, but it has been years since a threshersh maw fell! Your names shall live in glory. Grunt, you are Urdnot. You may now own property, join the army, and apply to serve under a Battlemaster."

Still on his knees, Grunt spoke decisively, "Shepard is my Battlemaster. She has no equal."

"Understood. Congratulations, Urdnot Grunt." The shaman held out a shotgun as he continued, "Rise and accept this token from Fortack. His weapons are the finest we have."

Shepard stepped up. "What were you called before you became shaman?"

The big Krogan shook his head as he spoke, "I gave up my name when I became the shaman. I am a
conduit for the rage and bloodlust of my people. It would be wrong to retain my old identity. My life belongs to the clan."

Shepard nodded in acknowledgement. "Is there anything else I need to know for Grunt? What other Rites and ceremonies do we need to plan for?"

"You have seen the Rite of Passage." The shaman glanced at Grunt, "Most Krogan suffer the Rite of Life at birth, not sure about the tank-bred... but he'll need to do the Rite of Honor when he wishes to be considered for breeding. The Rite of Firsts is suffered before a Krogan faces a new enemy. Clan leaders and shamans undergo many other rites in service to the clan. We do not speak of those unless he is chosen."

The shaman looked back to Shepard as he continued. "Tuchanka is a place of great gifts. It kills the weak, torments the slow, and destroys the stupid. Survival is an honor, and here, Krogan thrive! Go say your farewells to Wrex and I will give Grunt that which he needs. May your foes be strong enough to keep you sharp, Shepard."

Shepard and Mordin headed down to see Wrex and left Grunt with the shaman to do whatever they needed to do. As they approached the dais, Wrex pointed an accusing finger at Shepard. "You just can't help making trouble. No one has killed a maw since my turn in the Rite. Next you'll tell me he's a quint and craps dark matter." He chuckled as he continued, "Guess that's what it will take to replace me."

Shepard laughed, "You don't need to worry about that any time soon, Wrex. Grunt selected me as his Battlemaster, so he's staying on the Normandy. We're going up against the Collectors. I'd like to have you with us, but Grunt will have to bear the Krogan banner on his own...I know you have other priorities for now, and we'll need the Krogan to be ready when the real enemy shows up."

Wrex glowered, "The rest of the Reapers... Still think they're coming, Shepard?"

Shepard nodded, "I can't say for sure Wrex, but the Collectors are using Reaper tech, so my guess is yes. I sure don't want to be caught with my pants down if they do show up."

Wrex nodded in agreement. "You got that right. I've got a good start here, but a long way to go before the clans are truly united. No matter. We'll come when you call, ready or not."

Wrex stood to greet his newest member of the clan. As Grunt walked up, Wrex stepped down from the dais and started speaking. "You are Urdnot Grunt. Welcome." Wrex pounded Grunt on his shoulder. "I entrust you to your Battlemaster. I have no doubt she will find you good fights and teach you well." He then turned to Shepard and clasped arms with her. "It was good to see you, my friend. You still with Liara?" Shepard's smile was all he needed for confirmation. "Ha! Thought so, but had to ask. Figured she's not on the Normandy, or she would have been here. Tell her I say hello, next time you speak. Fight well, Shepard."

Shepard was still smiling as they dropped arms. "I'll do that Wrex, and I'm sure Liara'd say hello in return. Watch yourself, there's still some dissent in the ranks. Though I did forget to tell you, Grunt turned Uvenk to dust, so you don't have to worry about him anymore."

As Shepard turned and left, the only response she got from Wrex was hearty laughter.

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Sha'ira sat elegantly on Tevos' couch in her office, looking rather serenely at the councilor, given the urgency of the discussion. "You know I can't give you details, Rae. I won't breach the confidence of
my clients."

Tevos huffed. "Fine. But how am I supposed to judge for myself the severity of the situation if you can't explain it to me?"

The consort merely smiled softly as she replied. "You don't need details to recognize that Liara is lacking the guidance that should have been provided by Benezia. Shepard gives her all that she is, but does not possess an Asari Matriarch's soul. She cannot possibly provide all Liara needs. Our Little Wing lacks the guidance befitting a young maiden and has been left to her own devices to handle the shifting tides alone. None should be left to flounder so, especially one of such an influential house and so important to our future."

Tevos sighed in surrender. "Yes, I suppose you are right, but just what do you expect me to do about it?"

"I need your help." Sha'ira's tranquil smile faltered for the briefest of moments as she continued. "We need to convince Aethyta to abandon her pledge."

Tevos raised her forehead in surprise. "So, it's okay for Aethyta to forgo her pledge, when you refuse to do the same with yours?"

Sha'ira's mask of serenity vanished in an instant, disapproving of Tevos' flanking attack on her position as Consort. "You know better than that, Raesia!" Sha'ira took a deep breath and regained her composure before continuing. "Aethyta's oath was to a now dead Asari. My clients are still very much alive. Besides, Benezia was supposed to tell Liara about Aethyta when the maiden hit 100 and it never happened. The secret was supposed to already be out. Thyta is being held to a pledge that by all rights should have been terminated eight years ago."

Tevos, properly chastised, closed her eyes as she responded. "So what do you expect of me?"

The consort smiled, "I'm heading to Illium tomorrow to speak with Liara. While there, I would like to 'breach the wall,' so to speak, with Aethyta. I just want to know if I have your support before I do so. You know Thyta is the next best thing to Benezia, no matter how crass we may personally believe her approach to life may be."

Tevos nodded, "Yes. But I'm also aware of how stubborn Aethyta can be. She won't be easily swayed on this issue. What will we do when she refuses?"

Sha'ira laughed gently. "She won't refuse. Liara is her daughter, and eventually she'll recognize the need for it and acquiesce. It may not be tomorrow, matter of fact I highly doubt it, but it will happen eventually."

Tevos suddenly frowned. "And what if Liara refuses to accept her? If she's too angry over what she will interpret as abandonment?"

Sha'ira frowned in response. "I've thought about that and it's a good question. Liara can be amazingly illusive and stubborn, and has the resistant energy of youth. If that turns out to be the case, she may actually be the tougher giant to fell." Sha'ira shook her head and continued. "We'll just have to cross that bridge if we come to it."
While the Normandy was enroute to Bekenstein to help Kasumi recover her dead partner's mysterious graybox, Shepard took advantage of the free time and retreated to her cabin. It was a couple of days' transit from Tuchanka, so she could catch up on the multitude of little things that had a tendency to get pushed to the back burners. Her new evening wear that now hung in the room was much better than the evil dress and heels buried in the deepest corner of the closet. The tux was actually quite stylish and very feminine, and the accessories were a pale green satin that almost perfectly matched Shepard's eyes. The part of the outfit that she most appreciated was the boots. They were obviously high fashion dress boots, yet still low-heeled enough to be functional; which Shepard defined as easy to maneuver and really run in if it became necessary. Kasumi was a miracle worker. How she managed to 'acquire' such an outfit in the short period of time they had been on the Citadel was beyond Shepard, and she didn't want to know. Even still, she had a feeling that if not for Samara's oath to Shepard, the Justicar would most likely have hunted down both her and Kasumi at the end of the mission.

Shepard pulled out a datapad, sunk down onto her couch, and composed a number of two-line messages. The first was just a quick hello to her mom and a request to explain her status to Culver. Shepard figured folks within the Alliance had probably at least heard the rumors, so she felt bad because one of her closest friends may have heard she was alive through a source other than via a personal contact. She also needed Culver to understand that her connection to Cerberus was forced upon her by circumstances that she would remedy at her first opportunity. Last time they had been on the Citadel, Karin visited Dr Chloe Michel at her clinic in the wards and passed a message to Thessia, updating Arlyna and Niria. So, other than members of the old crew Shepard couldn't get to, Culver was the last of the inner circle to be notified that Shepard was actually still alive and kicking... and still Alliance in her heart. Once everyone knew, it would be easy to set up a distribution list and blast info out to everyone at the same time. She then crafted an update for Anderson to give him a heads-up in case the next mission went badly.


Shepard figured that would get a rise out of the old man; not only because Bekenstein was in the heart of Citadel space, but because any mention of transiting the Omega-4 relay had that effect on just about everyone. Even the terminal assassin who was already dying still took the time to mention it. Shepard had avoided the topic with Liara, but it was hard to imagine the Information Broker didn't know what her plans were. She knew they'd have to talk about it sooner or later, but their reunion had been too delicate to throw another wrench into the works. There would be time for that discussion later, as the actual jump got closer. Not like she could dismiss the need to do it, but Shepard wasn't ready to contemplate the potential outcomes of that trip yet, so shook her head and refocused on her data burst. Of course, she wanted to send a personal note to Liara as well, but she wanted to see if there was anything inbound from her bondmate before she drafted that particular note. She quickly reviewed the draft messages and activated the comm device. Within moments it had completed the burst and shut itself down; she received two new messages. The first was a heartwarming note from her mom and it was a very short, basically saying she was once again keeping in regular touch with Liara and ended with professions of encouragement, love and faith. Liara's memo, on the other hand was a tad more entertaining.

Shepard was impressed when she read the hello to Wrex, but wasn't sure whether she should laugh or be creeped out that Liara knew where she was. Liara's network was very good, and Shepard decided to be comforted by her bondmate keeping such close tabs on her, but shuddered as the next thought ran unbidden across her consciousness... that Liara would most likely know very quickly if she was seriously wounded or killed on a mission, unless she just vanished behind the Omega-4 relay, never to be seen again. Then, there would never be any information; the Normandy would just be lost, no explanations. Shepard worried that Liara would never be able to let that go and would attempt to follow them to discover their fate. Once again, Shepard shook her head, angry at herself, and pushed such thoughts to the back of her mind to focus on drafting her response.


After booting the device again and sending the burst to Liara, Shepard stood up and stretched before heading out the door to talk to some of the crew. They had a lot going on, and Shepard wanted them to know she hadn't forgotten them. Her first stop was the Bridge for a chat with the pilot. She walked into the middle of a rather heated discussion. "What's going on, Joker?"

Jeff glanced over his shoulder with a frown. "Just having an argument about personalization of my workspace..."

Edi's disembodied voice chimed in, "Cerberus regulations are clear, Mr Moreau. 'Personalization' does not include grease on my Bridge cameras."

Shepard almost laughed, swearing the synthetic voice was doing a very good simulation of being quite annoyed with the flight lieutenant.

Jeff looked at Shepard and did laugh, as he offered something of an explanation. "It's just mad because all its footage of me looks like a dream sequence."

Shepard sighed, knowing she was about to be very unpopular. "Joker. As much as you may disagree, the cockpit is not your personal space, and while Edi has nothing to do with the camera placement, it is her job to monitor them. Digital recorders and black boxes are commonplace in the cockpit, no matter what you're flying, so live with it and quit messing with them."

As Joker started to protest, Shepard cut him off. "That's my final word, Joker. If you want to sit around and watch porn vids, that's fine, but do it in the lounge on your own time. Not in the cockpit when you're sitting in that chair." Shepard knew he was going to complain about how he was the only pilot, so she preempted his argument with her next statement. "And before you say anything about not having time off, consider whether you really want to share fly time with someone else up here besides you...because I can get a secondary pilot easy enough to give you more down time."

Joker's jaw snapped closed on his rejoinder. "Fine, Commander. If that's how you want to play it...but nobody else touches my baby." His face set into a deep scowl.

Shepard rolled her eyes at the pilot. "Oh, Joker. Don't be that way. You know those cameras are as much for your safety as anything else. Especially you, being up here at odd hours like you are. If anything ever happened to you while the rest of the ship was sleeping..."

Joker didn't say anything, but Shepard could tell by the way he squirmed in his seat she had, at the very least, pulled the argument to a draw. She was ok with that and left while they were in relative balance, heading down to the bowels of Engineering. As she rolled around the corner at the bottom of the stairs, Jack was in her normal place, parked on her cot with a pistol beside her and a pile of datapads at her feet. At the sound of footsteps, Jack's head came up and she looked at the
commander. "Hey."

"Hey, Jack. Just checking in to see if you've come up with anything yet in the data files." And wondering why you have a live weapon out of the armory, but that's not worth the fight...as long as you don't shoot anyone.

"Nah. Got bored and had to take a break so decided to check out your ship. It's pretty hot... would love to put her through her paces when you're not around."

Shepard's brow furrowed in disapproval. "I doubt Joker would appreciate that, and I'm pretty sure Edi would somehow block you."

Jack got up and walked away, crossing her arms over her chest, either in defiance or a standard protective posture, and leaned against a bulkhead. "Relax. Joy-riding isn't all it's cracked up to be. If I wanted the ship, I'd just take it. Nobody would be able to stop me."

In response to a snort of disbelief from Shepard, Jack continued on and told tales of a number of her exploits, ranging from petty theft to terrorism; her activity ran the gamut, including the theft of a military aircraft. Of course it was a Turian vessel, not Alliance, and not with Joker at the helm and Edi in the core. The discussion did prove one thing to Shepard though; Jack had serious trust issues, but with a number of good reasons. She had pretty much been treated like shit her entire life and almost always ended up on the short end of the deal, left only with revenge to even the score. Jack finished out her sordid résumé with a telling statement. "Everybody wants something. And because of that, everything is fair game."

Shepard vowed to make Jack's time on the Normandy different than anything she had ever experienced. She needed Jack committed, not just to the mission, but to the Normandy and her crew. "Do you ever regret any of the things you've done? Wished you had done something differently?"

Jack scoffed, "There's no reason I should be alive, but I am. You know why? Instinct. It's worked for me so far and I'm not going to change now."

Shepard shook her head and sighed. "Jack. This mission's going to be tough and we're going somewhere no one has ever come back from alive. I don't plan on dying beyond the Omega-4, but for us to get back; we have to work as a team. We have to trust one another. Think you can get there from here?"

Jack pushed herself off the wall and squared herself up to Shepard before answering, surprisingly responsive to the query. "I've never trusted anyone in my life, Shepard, but no one's ever asked me about this shit either. No one ever cared enough to bother, so it's strange to talk about. So fuck you, and thanks for asking."

Without waiting for a response, Jack flopped back down on the cot and returned to the datapads. It wasn't really the answer Shepard was looking for but was more than what she expected, so chose not to challenge it and risk the apparent breakthrough she had just made. It was said in a brusque way, accompanied with a 'fuck you' but she actually got a thank you out of Jack. Shepard figured she'd make a tactical withdrawal while she was ahead. One step at a time, Shepard. One step at a time.

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When Shepard got up the next morning, the first thing she did was fire up the data burst transmitter. She immediately got two pings and was curious...she had only expected a message from Liara. She chuckled when she read the first message and realized she should have anticipated that one as well. It was from Anderson, and the way it was phrased it was hard to tell if it was in reference to
Bekenstein or the Omega-4 relay; possibly both.

Christ, Shepard. You really like to poke the bear, don't you? Next time, don't tell me. I don't want to know. At least then, if the shit hits the fan I don't have to feign ignorance. Take care!

She also got a reply from Liara that wasn't very reassuring; it made Shepard wish they could go in to Hock's compound under the Spectre flag, guns blazing. But given it was in the same system as the Citadel, she knew it wasn't an option. It was amazing how much fear Liara could impart in two lines of data. At least she didn't try to tell Shepard not to go.

VERY well secured/defended/Heavy mechs/Atlas/gunships/small private army with undercover operatives/top-notch security/Advise double squad w/heavy weapons. Be careful, Love! Please!

Liara was obviously concerned about the mission; the Hock compound was apparently a very dangerous place and Donovan Hock was not known for playing nice. Shepard didn't have the heart to tell her she was starting the mission at a society party, in evening wear and carrying nothing but a small pistol. After receiving news like that, however, Shepard spent most of the day with Kasumi, going back over the plan and the cover the master thief had established for her. They were getting into the compound because Hock was throwing a party and Shepard's cover, a leader of a small but talented Terminus merc band, had gotten an invite. How Kasumi had arranged it all, Shepard didn't want to know, but figured Kas could easily sideline as a document forger and identity changer.

The plan was simple; go to the party, find and break into Hock's vault, locate the graybox and make good their escape. The execution was a bit more complex. As good as Kasumi was, even she wasn't counting on getting in and out without being detected and she believed in being prepared for the worst case scenario. Along that line, Shepard's armor and weapons were smuggled in, contained in the base of a statue that her cover alias gave Hock as a birthday present. Shepard had practically choked when Kasumi told her the 'gift' was a golden statue of Saren. The biggest trick would be getting in and out of the vault. Kasumi was sure Hock had top of the line security, but she wouldn't know exactly what they were facing until she saw it in person, so the break-in itself would be the trickiest part of the whole operation. Kasumi, and therefore Shepard, had to operate on the fly.

Before Shepard left for the day, she had just one more question. Her voice dropped, not quite to a whisper, but definitely solemn. "This isn't just another heist, is it? What's in the graybox that makes it worth all this trouble?"

Kasumi's voice cracked as she spoke, "It holds Keiji's memories. Everything from all the codes and plans he stole to... all the time we spent together. Embedded in those memories is some massive secret he discovered. Keiji never told me what it was, just that it was very important. It's what got him killed. I... I need to know why it was so important, and I can't let Hock win. For Keiji."

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They couldn't exactly show up at Hock's place in a Normandy shuttle, so landed at the local space port and rented a skycar. While on the way to the compound, Kasumi admired her own handiwork. "Looking good, Ms Alison Gunn. Hock won't be able to keep his eyes off you. He's rich and he's charismatic. Just don't forget he's also a dangerous weapons dealer and smuggler. Hock is the type to crack open a skull to get what he wants. He killed my partner and literally ripped the graybox from his brain."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Sounds like a charmer."

Kasumi agreed, "He actually is, but don't let it deceive you. Just don't start talking business with him and you'll be fine. Once we're inside, I'll make my way to the vault and figure out what we need to
get in. You get to socialize and case the security, see what we're up against."

Shepard shrugged, "Sounds easy enough. What's the catch? I'm sure you didn't bring me along just as a distraction."

"I have no idea what type of security is on the vault. I'm sure I'll need your help breaking in. I'm just not sure what that help is yet... and I'll certainly need your help getting back out." Kasumi glanced over at the commander. "This isn't going to be a cake walk. He has top of the line security and video surveillance. We'll get caught eventually. We just need it to be after we lay hands on the graybox."

The trip from the port wasn't long, and they rode the rest of the way in silence, and as they arrived at the compound, they were met at the door by the host, Donovan Hock. The man spoke with an enchanting old Irish brogue, "You may pass through, Ms Gunn, you were invited after all, but I'm afraid your ... security guard must remain outside. You understand, I hope."

Knowing they had secure comms and Kasumi had a cloak and could enter at any time, Shepard shrugged and quickly agreed to the terms, "She can stay with the car. No problem. You're the host." She contentedly allowed Hock to lead the way. Once inside, she began to mingle and look around. She quickly counted the security guards, and recognized they were fairly standard Eclipse mercenaries; nothing special from what she could tell. As she wandered, she located a datapad that contained a message between two security guards, lamenting their inability to sneak away during the party because their boss was on duty, Security Chief Roe. From the tone of the message, Chief Roe was a hard ass and Shepard wasn't looking forward to finding out why. Kasumi was of a different opinion, thinking she could possibly use that information if they could tap into the guard's communications.

In the mean time, Kasumi cloaked and worked her way to the back of the ballroom, where her information indicated the entrance to the vault would be. When she found the entrance, Shepard heard her over the comms. "Very nice. There's more here than I expected." Kasumi chuckled as she continued, "You don't even have to wait to get into the vault to get your weapons and armor. They left the statue right here in the vault anteroom." Kasumi's voice got serious again, very quickly. "Liara was right. This is top of the line stuff. There's a triple layer of security. A voice activated password lock, a kinetic barrier and a DNA scanner."

Shepard found a quiet corner and risked speaking, "Sounds tough. Can you do it?"

"Oh please. Remember who you're talking to. We'll need to get a voice sample, so you'll have to chat up Hock for a bit, and we'll need to figure out his password, so we need to get into the security office. DNA is easy. I just need to get into his private quarters. That should be easy enough."

Shepard was not so confident. "I'm glad you think this is going to be so easy. What about the barrier?"

"That wasn't even worth mentioning. Cut the power. Done. Keiji could get through a system like this in his sleep, and I'm better." Kasumi was all business now. All the casual humor was gone from her voice as she spoke. "There's a stairwell at the back of the ballroom. Come meet me, and I'll set your omnitool to scan for electromagnetic fields. You can trace and kill the power while I get into Hock's quarters and collect DNA."

Neither task was particularly difficult and both were soon complete. Kasumi quickly got back on the comm and she directed Shepard to the security office door and they easily slid in undetected. There was a short hallway before the main office and when they got to the end, the doorway slid open. Shepard and Kasumi quickly realized the security office was occupied by two guards... who were in no way expecting trouble. Shepard pulled on her biotics and did a quick charge, taking one guard down without a struggle, and as she turned to shoot the second guard, Kasumi suddenly uncloaked
behind him and took him down as he started to point his pistol at Shepard. It was all done nice and quiet, no shots fired to attract any unwanted attention. Kasumi hacked into the computer, and Shepard immediately started searching loose datapads for clues. Through the computer, Kasumi was able to hack into the comm net, so they would know when security was alerted. In the meantime, Shepard scanned through the datapads and found the password, Peruggia. Kasumi laughed, "Nice. That's the name of the man who stole the Mona Lisa. Hock has a sense of humor. Now all we need is enough of a voiceprint to use portions to recreate the word."

They moved back out into the main hall, and soon Kasumi indicated she was ready to record, whenever the commander was ready to chat up Hock. The man apparently loved the sound of his own voice, and with a couple of simple prods from Shepard, he felt the urge to make a speech about the need for people like them. "Most people only have to worry about the simple luxuries. Why? Because people like me—and you—are doing the terrible things that keep the galaxy spinning. This party is for us. The cleaners. The support structure for the galaxy's gleeful delusions of peace." As he rambled, he drew a crowd; eventually, he glanced around at his audience and threw his arms wide as he finished. "May there always be a market for the things we do." He refocused on Shepard, "Enjoy the party, Ms Gunn. I must continue to mingle with my guests, but it's been a pleasure."

Kasumi was very pleased; it was more than enough for a sufficient voice sample. "That should be everything we need. I just need to manipulate the voice print to string together the password, and we'll be able to get in the vault. Let's head down there."

In no time at all, they were in. Shepard had killed the power to the barrier, Kasumi had collected the necessary DNA, and together they collected the voice print to create Hock's voice saying the password. What they thought was a vault door was actually an access door to an elevator. Kasumi gave it one glance and looked at Shepard. "Break out your armor and weapons and get suited up while I disable the video surveillance in the elevator. I have a feeling things are about to get interesting at the other end of this ride."

When the doors opened at the bottom of the shaft, there was a surprising lack of guards, but the vault itself was impressive. As they stepped out and looked around the room, Kasumi's eyes got wide and Shepard let out a low whistle. There were multiple statues, obviously of great value, along with any number of artifacts from various cultures. They included Earth items Shepard easily recognized, like the head from the Statue of Liberty, Michelangelo's David, and one of the ancient Pharaoh statues. Kasumi opened her omnitool. "This scanner will hone in on the graybox." She let out an audible sigh of relief. "Good. I was afraid Hock secured it separately, somewhere offsite in a safe, but it's actually here. It's not far." As they approached the display with the graybox, sitting alongside their target was THE Kassa Locust...the gun that killed two Presidents. Shepard couldn't resist but to pick it up and see how it fit in her hand. She nodded in approval of its feel and balance, and promptly locked it into an empty hardpoint on her gear rack. Kasumi chuckled, "I'm sure Hock won't mind it we 'borrow' it."

The Locust didn't hold her attention for long though, as her eyes drifted to the item sitting next to it. "Oh my god. There it is!" She quickly opened another application on her omnitool and began scanning and downloading data from the graybox.

Immediately, a large screen turned on at the end of the vault and an image of Donovan Hock appeared. "Don't bother, Ms Goto. It's codelocked. I had a feeling that was you at the door. I knew if it was really you, you'd get through anyway."

Kasumi was smug, "You know me. I don't like to disappoint."

Hock was not to be sidetracked, and got straight to the point. "I need what's in your graybox,
Kasumi. You know I'm willing to kill you for it. I'll admit your skills are impressive. You got into my vault like I'd left it open, but you're still going to die, screaming, just like your old friend."

Shepard was done playing nice with this man and drew her pistol, blasting a nearby piece into oblivion. Hock came unglued, screaming in frustration. Shepard just looked at him and in a calm voice simply asked, "Have I got your attention?"

Kasumi chuckled, "Well. That shut him up."

Hock growled out, "Kill them!"

Doors on the end of the room opposite the elevator opened up and troops emerged. As Shepard and Kasumi dived for cover, Kasumi calmly quipped, "This is where your special skills come into play, Shepard. Let's do this."

Shepard glanced up the aisle and almost laughed. Hock had only sent a team of six. Against her and Kasumi, that was child's play. The team was quickly eliminated and Kasumi pulled up the facility blueprints. "There's a landing pad to the east. Let's get out of here."

Shepard nodded agreement and contacted the Normandy, "Joker. Dispatch the shuttle to our location. Now!"

Going out through the doors where the troops just came from, they immediately ran into resistance. The first couple of guards went down easy, but in the distance was a bunch more, supported by an Atlas mech. It was time consuming, but still pretty easy to take down. While Shepard was visible and drew the majority of fire, Kasumi cloaked and operated in their backfield, taking many of them down before they even realized she was there. Anytime they turned to face her, Shepard took advantage and blasted away while they were facing the other direction. The dual-sided attack quickly put the odds in their favor and Kasumi and Shepard cleaned house. They restocked their thermal clips from the dead mercs and pressed on through to the next section of the warehouse.

They were initially confronted by three more guards on a raised platform, but Shepard easily exposed the first with a lift and then pulled on her biotics to 'crash and blast' him. As she blasted the second at close range with her shotgun, Kasumi took the third from behind, using her cloak. More troops started rolling in from a side door and the battle got intense for a moment or two because Shepard's charge had left her exposed. Shepard let instinct take over and her mind took a short detour. *Liara would be kicking my ass right about now for jumping into that without looking first...* The resultant melee left her slightly wounded, so she had to take a moment to apply medigel and give her shields time to recover.

The room from where the additional troops had emerged was a dead-end; nothing but a mech storage room, so they needed to find another way out. When Shepard figured it out, she thought of Wrex and planted a huge grin on her face; there was a Grizzly parked in the warehouse, and Shepard relished the idea of using 'superior firepower' to simply blow a hole in the wall and make her own exit. As she climbed up on the vehicle, she heard Kasumi whisper to herself, "And I thought I was crazy..."

With a smirk on her face, Shepard pulled the trigger and blasted a huge hole. Hock's voice came over a loudspeaker, "What the hell are you people doing down there? Kill Gunn and bring Goto to me!"

Shepard laughed at the fact that Hock still had no idea who she was. As they jumped through the hole into the next section of warehouse, there were more guards and another heavy mech. Nothing they hadn't already faced, and they continued to work their way to the east exit. As they marched through Hock's troops, he still wasn't admitting defeat and taunted Kasumi. "Don't fight me, Kasumi. You know what happened to your boy toy when he fought back."
Kasumi growled, "You don't talk about Keiji like that! Murderer!"

After they cleaned up the last few mercs in the section, Shepard grabbed her partner by the shoulder. "Kas! Listen to me. He's purposely trying to rile you. Don't let your emotions control you. Take a deep breath and stay focused!"

Kasumi shook her head as if to clear the cobwebs. "Sorry, Shep. You're right. I'm good. Let's keep moving. This next room should be the last before the exit."

Just then, Hock's voice rang out again. "Keep them busy. I'll take care of this myself."

Shepard grinned. "Well, I wanted to come in guns blazing and take the man himself down, guess I get to do just that after all. Just glad they all still think I'm Alison Gunn!"

As she and Kasumi cleared the last room, they finally found themselves outside on the loading docks. They were immediately confronted by Donovan Hock... in a gunship, with a shitload of mercs to back him up. Shepard lost her grin and shouted out, "Incoming! Get Down!"

The smug bastard was still taunting them. "You could have done this the easy way, Goto. Allow me to show you the hard way."

Shepard growled, "No sweat, Kas. I've been here before, on Omega. We took that gunship down; we can take this one, too!"

They focused first on the mercs so they couldn't be flanked, then started to chisel away at the gunship's shields. The entire time, Hock kept at it, encouraging them to give up. "Lay down your weapons!"

Kasumi and Shepard answered him with weapons' fire and eventually managed to knock the shields out. As soon as they did so, Hock retreated out of sight to let the shields recover, and they used the time to load up on spare thermal clips from the first round of mercs they killed. All too soon, the gunship reappeared and the fight began anew and Hock continued with his diatribe. "What did you tell your friend, Kasumi? You're doing this for love?"

Hock's rants no longer bothered the master thief and she maintained her cool. "The gunship is back with full shields! If I can get to the ship, I can take those shields down for good!"

Shepard had no idea what Kasumi was thinking, but could tell their continued survival was starting to irritate the man. If they could make him angry, perhaps he'd make a mistake and Kasumi would get her opportunity. Wasn't much longer before they could tell Hock was beginning to doubt his own success. "Even if you escape, I'll scour the galaxy for you!"

Kasumi ignored him and kept on talking. "I need a clear path to the gunship. Take out this next group of guards and keep Hock distracted!"

Shepard grunted, "I'm on it!" and concentrated her fire to the mercs on the ground. When the last guard fell, Shepard witnessed what was probably the most acrobatic maneuver she had ever seen.

Kasumi shouted out, "Got a clear shot! Here we go!" She suddenly broke cover at a full sprint and quickly scaled the steam pipes rising out of the loading dock, somehow getting traction where Shepard knew there was nothing to hang onto. Kasumi flipped herself up onto the topmost horizontal pipe, accelerated along its length and leapt from the end, and landed on the gunship. Shepard then saw Kasumi's omnitool light up and some type of electrical discharge struck into the gunship's shield. The shield started to flicker and go unstable, eventually winking out completely. Shepard was dumbfounded as she watched Kasumi throw Hock a flippant salute before she leapt from the
gunship, back down to the dock. Very calmly, Kasumi turned to Shepard and spoke, "Shield's down. Let's tear that thing apart." As Kasumi focused on her, Shepard got a taste of what her own stare probably did to her foes. She knew right then, she never wanted to get on the master thief's bad list.

It was the beginning of the end for Hock but his ego didn't let him give up, which was probably a good thing. It guaranteed he didn't live to fight another day, so there would be no scouring of the galaxy as he had threatened, once they escaped his compound. Shortly after the shields fell, the fight ended abruptly with the gunship blowing up in a huge ball of fire, allowing the Normandy shuttle a safe approach.

Back on the Normandy, Shepard was surprised when Kasumi gripped her forearm to get her attention. "Shep...I...I'd like you to come with me. I want you to see what you fought for."

Shepard raised her eyebrows in her surprise. "If that's what you want, Kasumi. I figured you'd want to view whatever's on there in private."

Kas shook her head. "No. Keiji died for whatever is on here, and you helped me get it back. It's important to me to know and I... I'd like to have a friend ... you...with me. Please."

Shepard couldn't deny what almost seemed like a desperate plea, and quietly gestured for Kasumi to lead the way. When they got to the lounge, Kasumi plugged the box in and it began to play. Shepard didn't know what the information was; just that it was bad news for the Alliance if the Council got wind of it. They wouldn't know exactly what was embedded in the memory files unless Kasumi actually ran the decryption. What she did know was that Kasumi and Keiji had been much more than mere partners in crime; they had been very much in love. "Gods, Kas. I'm so sorry. Is there no way to destroy the data and still save the memories?"

Kasumi shook her head sadly. "No. Keiji was a master at encrypting files. The only way to destroy the data would be to run the decryption, and running that would destroy the memories in the process. You can't destroy one without destroying both." Silent tears ran down the thief's face; Kasumi made no attempt to hide them, or to wipe them away.

Shepard turned away, not wanting to view Kasumi's open grief. "You heard him, Kasumi. He wanted you to destroy the information, to protect yourself. He never intended to put you in danger."

Kasumi stared at the graybox. "I know. I just...I can't. It's all I have left of him."

Shepard looked back to the petite Asian woman, who suddenly seeming extremely vulnerable. "Kas. You know what he said is true...that you don't need a neural implant to remember him or who he was." Shepard paused briefly before continuing. "If it's too difficult, I can do it for you."

"No. If it's to be done, it has to be me." Kasumi looked one last time at the image still displayed on the screen. "Gomen nasai, Keiji-san." She typed in the destruct code and she and Shepard watched in silence as the images deconstructed and vanished from the screen for forever. The normally buoyant Kasumi was anything but and Shepard wrapped her in strong arms of comfort, holding her for a long time as she wept.

When she finally emerged from the observation lounge, Shepard headed to the Armory with the sole intent of dropping off her weapons and showing Jacob the new Locust SMG, but when she got there Jacob seemed out of sorts. "Commander. Sorry, I'm a little unfocused. Personal matter. It won't affect
my duties."

Shepard frowned. "If you're unfocused, it is affecting your duties, Jacob. Is this about what I saw earlier with Miranda?"

"No, ma'am. That's been resolved. This... I didn't want to waste your time if it turned out to be a wild goose chase, but... I got pinged by a ghost the other night. My father."

Shepard's brow wrinkled in confusion. "What do you mean? A ghost?"

Jacob sighed and leaned on the work table in the middle of the room. "I got an update on the Hugo Gernsback, the ship my father served on. It's been missing for ten years, yet just last week it apparently transmitted an SOS, reporting a crash and requesting rescue. It makes no sense."

Shepard nodded. "So you want to go check it out?" It was more a statement than a question.

"I hadn't talked to my father for three years before he even took that mission. I've buried everything but the body. Just seems like this is the worst possible timing for this to suddenly pop up." Jacob was noticeable bothered by the development. "I'm not convinced it isn't some automated distress signal ticking over. It's been too long."  

Shepard read all the body signals Jacob was displaying and answered simply. "But with what we're about to do, you need to know. You want to go see the wreck. I can easily understand your desire to see if it's legit."

Jacob sighed, "Yeah. If the coordinates aren't too far out of our way, I could at least verify the wreck. Who knows, maybe there is actually someone out there." Jacob stood upright and crossed his arms. "I also want to mention that I don't make a habit of looking for random SOS signals. This was passed to my personal log through Cerberus filters."

Shepard just shrugged. "Any idea who from?"

Jacob shook his head as he answered. "No clue. Whoever sent this my way covered their tracks. Someone could be fishing for a favor or thought it would get under my skin. Who knows with that bunch."

"I guess it really doesn't matter." Shepard didn't really have to ponder it very long. "It's something you need to do. We'll make time for it, Jacob. Go ahead and forward the coordinates to Joker and we'll get to it when we can."

"Thanks, Commander. I know it's not an emergency, but I'd like to close off any doubt." Jacob saluted sharply and turned to the weapons bench.

Shepard saluted back and smiled; out of the entire crew, Jacob was the only one who ever saluted her. She left the armory and headed towards Miranda's office. She wanted to give her the mission report for Bekenstein and figure out where they were headed next. As the door closed behind her, Miranda clasped her hands together and bowed her head, not looking at Shepard as she entered. Getting a bad feeling with the lack of eye contact, Shepard opened the discussion. "Miranda? What's going on?"

Miranda didn't say a word; just handed Shepard a datapad. A quick glance through and Shepard's head snapped up, her eyes completely focused on the operative. "He actually came through? Is this what I think it is?" Shepard could scarcely believe it.

Miranda nodded. "Yes, ma'am. It's a positive link to the Shadow Broker. I assume you want to head
"Absolutely. I never really thought he'd do it. We need to strike while this info is still good. Assuming it is, of course. Liara will have to verify it first." Shepard couldn't wait to see the expression on Liara's face when she turned this over to her. While Shepard reread the data, Miranda directed Joker to lay in a course for Illium. Eventually, Shepard pulled her eyes away from the information and looked at Miranda again, giving her all the pertinent information from their little field trip to Bekenstein, which really wasn't much. From the Cerberus perspective, really the only thing that counted was the addition of the Locust to the inventory, along with the other upgrades and credits they picked up along the way. Once she was done giving the report, she found out the real reason for Miranda's disquiet when she entered the office.

"Shepard. I wasn't going to bring this up, but since we're going to be on Illium anyway..." Miranda looked extremely uncomfortable, so Shepard waited patiently and the silence eventually forced Miranda to continue. "I find myself in the unpleasant position of asking for your help."

Shepard looked at Miranda and responded. "Miranda. Almost every person on the crew has some special mission or task they need to complete before we jump the Omega-4 relay, including me with Liara and the Shadow Broker. You're a part of my crew, so don't feel uncomfortable asking me for help."

Miranda was unusually nervous, fidgeting with her hands as she spoke. "You remember what I told you about my father... building a dynasty?" With a nod from Shepard, she continued. "Well, it wasn't just about me. There was another reason I went to Cerberus for protection." She couldn't handle it anymore and stood up, starting to pace as she spoke. "I have a sister. A twin. I took her with me, but father never gave up. He's still hunting her. I was able to take care of her myself, mostly, but Cerberus helped to keep Oriana safe. Until now. She's living a normal life on Illium, safe and hidden from my father, but that's changed. Somehow, he's finally figured out where she is."

Shepard scowled and crossed her arms. "So he's tracked her down. Has he threatened her?"

Miranda shook her head. "No, and he won't. There will be no warning. He'll just take her." She paused and looked directly at the commander. "He's too close, Shepard. I need to relocate my sister's family before it's too late."

By the time she got the whole story, Shepard was somewhat surprised at the extent of Miranda's involvement in the protection of her sister. Until now, she had never given any indication she even had any siblings. "How long since you've seen her? How much do you know about her?"

Miranda hung her head. "I've monitored her since she was placed with the family, but it's been years. She's my genetic twin. We're identical. But she deserves a normal life. I've managed to provide that for her so far, and I want to see that continue."

"Ok. So what do you need from me? Do you need the Normandy to provide secure transportation or something?" Shepard wasn't exactly sure how she could help.

"No, nothing like that. They have no idea this is happening in the background. Cerberus arranged for Oriana's father to get a tremendous job opportunity he couldn't pass up. We just need to make sure the move goes off without a hitch. That my father doesn't find out and that none of his agents get too close." Miranda could tell by Shepard's questions the commander was going to help, and it relaxed her enough that she smiled. "My contact's name is Lanteia. She'll be waiting for us in the lounge near the Nos Astra docking bay."
The Prodigal Daughter

Aethyta's head snapped up when the first acolyte walked into the bar. She quickly reached behind her and grabbed a bottle of Elasa and two glasses, and had them poured and ready by the time Sha'ira sat in front of her on a stool.

"Hell's bells, Sha'ira. Another visit to my daughter? What's wrong?" Aethyta's eyes were narrowed with concern and she wondered why she hadn't been told about the visit.

Sha'ira smiled disarmingly. "Not to worry, Aethyta. Things are good with Little Wing. Very good. Do you have any idea how far their relationship has developed?" There was no need to expand on who 'their' referred to.

The Matriarch let out a deep full laugh. "By the Goddess, yes. Last time I talked to Tevos I told her we have to watch Liara for an early push to matronhood. Any time Shepard's in town, she fucks my girl silly." Aethyta's eyes suddenly sprang open in realization. "Oh shit! Is it happening? I was kidding!"

It was Sha'ira's turn at mirth, though in contrast, Sha'ira's laugh was light and musical. It was pleasing to the ear; not the raucous, harsh sound Aethyta produced. "Oh, Thyta. You do have a way with words. No, our Little Wing isn't going through the change yet, but I imagine you are correct. We'll have to watch for it because there is a very good chance it may happen." Sha'ira paused and her expression became more serious. "I am here on another matter. But it is related."

Aethyta growled at her friend, "So spit it out. And don't be all metaphysical and philosophical on me. Just give it to me plain."

"I can do that. I have spoken to Tevos and she is in agreement...it is time for us to tell Liara..."

"Absolutely not!" Aethyta was livid. "I made a promise, and I'm damn sure I'm not going to break it now, just because Benezia is no longer with us!"

Sha'ira knew the explosion was coming, so didn't even blink as the bartender cut her off, loomed large leaning toward her over the bar, and got in her face. She just waited patiently, in silence, until Aethyta realized the consort wasn't going to fight her about it. When Aethyta backed off, Sha'ira continued, her eyes pleading but her voice steady. "Thyta. Nezzie was supposed to tell Liara eight years ago! You were supposed to have been released from that pledge and been introduced properly." Sha'ira held up a blocking hand when Aethyta went to interrupt again. "No. Please. Let me finish. I know circumstances are not ideal, but Little Wing needs you. She is about to go through a significant change and she has no mother, though no fault of yours."

Aethyta's eyes flashed dangerously. "No. It was that bastard Saren that led her down the golden path, but Benezia went with him...because she had no one else! I should have been there, Shi." Aethyta's eyes lost their fight, her shoulders slumped, and she dropped her gaze to the bar. "I should have been there."

The consort's face lit with surprise. "Has no one told you what really happened?"

Aethyta looked up. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Thyta! It wasn't Nezzie's fault! Saren's ship... Sovereign. It was a Reaper, Thyta. It took over Nezzie's mind." Seeing the shock on Aethyta's face tore Sha'ira's heart open, but she continued. "I know... a Matriarch as strong as Benezia...it's scary, but it's true. Thank the Goddess for Shepard and
Liara, fighting so hard to destroy that abomination! Who knows what kind of future we would have had, otherwise."

Aethyta shook her head in wonder. "Fuck. Whoever thought the monster stories of our youth were true?" Aethyta's head came up and she made eye contact, looking deeply into Sha'ira's eyes. "You're not just telling me this to make me feel better, right? It's the truth?"

The consort sighed. "Unfortunately, yes. It's true. A storm's coming, Aethyta. And our children, all of them, are going to be right in the middle of it all. Liara will need you."

"Ok. Fine. I need... I need time to think about all that and process it. But that's all I can promise... is to think about it. Telling Liara... I'm not sure about that." Aethyta felt like she needed to sit down, but there were no chairs behind the bar, so she just rested on her forearms on the countertop instead. "Shit."

Sha'ira placed a hand gently on Thyta's forearm. "I'm sorry, but there's more. Have you heard the term, Inanna?"

"Yeeaahhh?" Aethyta's glance at the consort reflected suspicion, her mind immediately making the right connections. "Now you're telling stories... Shepard's not Asari."

Sha'ira laughed. "Yes. What was your first clue? The hair?" Her hand fluttered in the air, waving away Aethyta's retort. "Apparently with them, that is not a roadblock. They have shared with me. Both. It's true."

Aethyta was dumbfounded and circled around the bar to sit on a stool next to Sha'ira, afraid her legs really would no longer support her. "For fuck's sake. Shit like this is supposed to happen to other people. What more can possibly happen?"

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The Normandy's trip back to Illium was just over two days, and Shepard made the most of it, finishing up her crew rounds. By the time she was done, she had a great feel for the crew's headspace. Garrus had finally opened up and told her the complete story about his team on Omega, how his whole team had gotten wiped out, and how his last desire before jumping the Omega-4 relay was to make the traitor who sold them out, Lantar Sidonis, pay for his deceit. Shepard promised him that if they got a lead on Sidonis before they hit the relay, she would divert to wherever was required to help Garrus close out that chapter in his life.

Zaeed convinced her to hit the Blue Suns stronghold on Zorya as soon as they were done with the Illium jobs, seeing as the Ismar Frontier was only one relay jump away. He had grinned in satisfaction as Shepard left his little hidey hole, knowing he was next in the queue. From what Zaeed told her, it would be a tough fight, and it would give her a chance to identify weaknesses in the team. Shepard appreciated that Zaeed was straight up with her, admitting that while the paid job was to take back the refinery, his personal goal was to take down the Blue Suns current leader, Vido Santiago. Knowing ahead of time, Shepard planned on taking two teams, allowing them to focus on both aspects of the mission. Shepard would take Garrus and Jacob with a focus on recapturing the refinery and getting the workers out safely, and since they had worked together before, she would task Mordin and Grunt to assist Zaeed on his personal quest to kill Vido. She also trusted Mordin to stay focused and to keep Zaeed from getting too overzealous on his hunt, making sure everyone on the team came back alive.

Samara and Thane were their normal introspective selves and Samara hadn't received any new information on the AML Demeter, so still didn't know anything new on the fugitive she was
pursuing, nor was she yet open to speaking freely with the commander. Their conversations were 
friendly, but Samara was extraordinarily deft at avoiding personal topics. Thane, on the other hand, 
revealed a bit more about himself and told Shepard about his family; the fact that the assassin even 
had one surprised her. He explained about the death of his wife and how he wasn't there for her, and 
then mentioned he also had a son. A son he hadn't seen for a very long time...ten years. He had left 
his son, Kolyat, in the care of his aunts and uncles and hadn't talked to him since. Shepard asked 
why he didn't raise his own son and Thane was blunt in his response. He was an assassin, always on 
the road, never staying in one place, and he did not want his son to grow up like that. He wanted 
Kolyat to find his own path. Thane's one desire before they passed beyond the Omega-4 relay was 
that he be able to check on his son. He didn't want to interfere...he just wanted to know that Kolyat 
was safe. Shepard understood completely, and let Thane know they were on the way to Illium, 
where she just happened to know a very good information broker. Shepard was sure the broker 
would be able to find his son.

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It was a very productive two days, but before Shepard finished her crew rounds, before any of those 
conversations had ever happened, as soon as Shepard stepped out of Miranda's office, she had gone 
directly to her cabin and immediately crafted and sent a message off to her bondmate.

_Urgent Illium business. Be there in two days. Need anything on Asari named Lanteia and human 
previously/currently known as Oriana Lawson. Yes. Sister. Keep the faith. Love you!_

Shepard purposely avoided mention of the information on the Shadow Broker. She wanted to see the 
expression on Liara's face when she handed her the datapad in person.

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Liara was relieved when she got the note from Shepard; it meant that the raid against Donovan Hock 
on Bekenstein was successful. Her sources had reported a massive firefight, with a large number of 
mercs being killed, employment of heavy weapons and the downing of at least one gunship. Based 
on the level of destruction, Liara assumed Shepard had taken her advice and was pleased the 
operation was such a rousing success. Most significant was that it was successful enough that 
Shepard was still alive and well, and _that_ was the only thing that was important to Liara. That and 
the fact that Shepard was returning to Illium, much sooner than planned or expected. Liara wouldn't 
normally care why, but Shepard had asked for information, and Liara had trouble finding it. Lanteia 
was easy; she was commando trained under House T'Geya and had departed Thessia free and clear 
from any other loyalties or obligations, as far as Liara could tell in the limited time she had to search. 
She was a free-lancer, and had been under the personal employ of one each Miranda Lawson for the 
last fifteen years. Oriana Lawson, on the other hand, practically didn't exist. She appeared on the 
scene in 2166 and then pretty much vanished again until some recent traffic indicated her presence 
on Illium. Someone had gone to a lot of effort to hide her identity and keep her off the radar.

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Liara started pacing her office the minute she was notified the Normandy had docked. Since Shepard 
had requested information, she assumed the commander would come to her office first thing, and it 
seemed to be taking forever. She could sense her bondmate's presence on the station, so she knew 
Shepard was off the Normandy. Glancing again at her chrono, Liara realized it had been less than 
two minutes. "Goddess! Why does time always seem to drag when you want it to pass quickly?" She 
voiced her question to empty air and forced herself to stop wearing a track on the floor. Finally, the 
entry swooshed open and Liara's entire focus was consumed by the entrance of Commander Shepard 
as she stepped through the doorway. After being so impatient, it seemed Liara's feet were
inexplicably rooted to the spot, and Shepard strode quickly across the office to draw the Asari into her arms. Their lips met in a surprisingly soft, passionate kiss as their bodies melted together in an intimate embrace with Liara's desire flaming through the meld. A corresponding yearning clamored through the commander and her body shuddered in protest as Shepard forced it down, unsatisfied. A whimper of disappointment escaped Liara's lips as her bondmate stepped back and held her at arms' length.

Shepard freed one hand and gently caressed Liara's cheek as she whispered, "I'm sorry, love, but we need to wait. We have pressing business. Did you find anything for me?"

Liara shook herself and forced her mind back to the situation at hand, and after a deep calming breath, she told Shepard what she had, and had not, found.

Shepard frowned at the news. "Damn it. I was actually hoping you couldn't find anything at all on Lawson." Liara's initial shock at such a statement faded as Shepard's focus shifted from her to Miranda as she continued. "That means if your father has been actively searching, he's had a whole day to implement whatever contingency plans he has in place. We need to move fast."

Shepard turned back to Liara and dug a datadisc out of a storage compartment, handing it over to the information broker and waiting for the reaction.

Liara's fire was instantly extinguished, as if Shepard had just dumped an entire bucket of ice water on her. "Shepard! This looks like a leaked transmission between Shadow Broker operatives. How in the galaxy did you get this?"

Shepard smiled. "Remember the issue we had with TIM? Well, Miranda came clean with a slightly modified version of events, and told him that if he wanted my full focus, we needed to help you out of a jam, else I would be too concerned about you to pay the mission full attention."

Liara's head actually snapped up from her omnitool momentarily as she exclaimed, "What!? She asked the Illusive Man for information?" She looked like a fish out of water, her eyes blinked several times and her mouth opened and closed a couple of times as she tried to formulate her next sentence without success. She finally choked out words reflecting her surprise, "And he actually helped us!"

Shepard made no mention as to Miranda's theories on why the Illusive Man would bother to assist. Fortunately, the 'why' seemed unimportant and Liara's focus quickly returned to the data. "It hints toward the location, and..." Her eyes suddenly sprung wide and a guarded smile split her face as she continued, "...it's about Feron, and he's still alive! At least as of the date of this transmission." Her face fell again. "I've never found anything that suggested he was alive, and after two years, I hadn't even dreamed. I truly hope this isn't a fabrication."

Shepard grimaced, "Li, if he's been in the Shadow Broker's hands for two years, he may not be in good shape, but if he's alive, we'll get him back and get him whatever treatment he needs."

Liara blinked back tears, "I know. But yesterday, all I wanted was the chance to avenge his death. Today, I have a chance to turn it into a rescue mission. I'll do whatever I have to, to get him back!"

Shepard immediately recognized the fire of grim resolution that lit in Liara's eyes. "Don't do anything rash. Start working on a plan, and we'll go take care of the Oriana business. Then, I'll meet you at the apartment and we'll go from there."

Liara nodded. "Sounds good. Hopefully I'll have at least the beginnings of a plan by then. Thank you, Shepard." She leaned in and kissed Shepard one last time before everyone headed for the door. "I'll see you later."
As Liara locked up the office, Shepard, Miranda and Garrus headed down to the Eternity bar to find Lanteia. Shepard waved a hello at Matriarch Aethyta behind the bar as the team entered a private room off to the side. Lanteia was leaning against the back wall, but immediately stood up as they entered the room, wasting no time. "Ms Lawson, I'm glad you made it. We've had a complication."

Concern flooded Miranda's face as she spared a quick glance at Shepard, wishing for once the woman's instincts had been wrong. "What happened? Is Oriana all right?"

Lanteia nodded as she spoke, "She's fine, but you listed a man named Niket as a trusted source. I hope that's still the case, because he contacted me, saying your father has dispatched some Eclipse mercs to make a sweep and locate her."

Shepard cursed under her breath and typed a quick message to Liara.

"You have any commandos available?"

Lanteia continued speaking. "He suggested they may also be watching for you personally. He's offered to escort Oriana's family to the terminal instead, as you act as a diversion."

Shepard shook her head. "I don't like it, Miranda. You didn't say anything about a Niket, and last minute changes are usually a really bad idea."

Miranda scratched her collar bone, which Shepard recognized as one of her nervous tells. "He's a friend. He and I go back a long way..."

Lanteia interrupted, "You want to bring in any of your other Illium contacts, Ms Lawson?"

Miranda answered quickly, "No. You and Niket are the only two I trust on this."

Shepard grimaced as a text rolled out on her omnitool. Before the conversation got any farther, Shepard spoke up. "Uh... Miranda? As soon as I heard the word Eclipse, I texted Liara. I have Judea headed this way... She'll be there in less than two. Sorry if I invited her out of turn, but I trust Judea with my life. Do you trust Niket with Oriana's?"

Miranda didn't even hesitate. "Absolutely. He's one of my oldest friends, he helped me get away from my father. And I've seen Judea in action. She's a welcome addition." Her focus shifted to her contact. "Lanteia, we'll follow Niket's suggestion. We'll take the car and draw their attention. Have Niket escort the family to the shuttle and give him full access to the family's itinerary, just to be safe."

Shepard's eyebrows raised, "So the plan is for us to get shot down by Eclipse while your sister gets to safety?"

Garrus chuckled in the background. "Sounds like old times, Shepard!"

Miranda rolled her eyes, "Please. Give me a little more credit than that, Shepard. I know my father. Eclipse will be under orders to take my sister alive. They won't risk anything that could kill us...At least not until they confirm she's not in the car."

Shepard nodded, "Well, there's that, but I doubt Eclipse will send all their people just to stop you. Do you want to give Niket any backup?"

"Niket can take care of himself. Besides, any armed backup just draws attention to him." Miranda saw Judea walk in and gestured toward her with her chin. "Your Asari's here. Let's get this started."
Shepard's head snapped around, expecting Liara from Miranda's phrasing, but was relieved when she just saw Judea, as expected. Not that Shepard wouldn't love to have Liara fighting by her side, but her bondmate had other things she needed to focus on at the moment. As they turned to head toward the car, Miranda spoke in a low voice, "Thank you, Shepard. I appreciate this. I hadn't planned on Eclipse... but I guarantee, they haven't planned on you."

As they approached the shuttle docks, they started seeing Eclipse gunships deploying troops all over the docks. Shepard growled out, "Put us down in that cover behind them."

Miranda's voice bordered on sarcasm as she replied, "Let's hope they really do want to take us alive." She looked to Shepard and cocked her head in question.

As gunfire erupted at the car, Shepard winced as the car lost altitude control and headed toward the deck. "Yeah, I wouldn't be counting on that anymore."

The team was relieved when a man they assumed to be the squad captain flagged the weapons down and they quit shooting at the skycar. The foursome disembarked and faced the Eclipse team leader. Miranda opened the dialogue. "Since you're not firing yet, I trust you know who I am."

The leader stepped up, confident and rude. "Yeah. They said you'd be in the car. You're the bitch that kidnapped our boss' little girl."

Miranda laughed in his face. "Kidnapped? Is that what that sadist told you? This shouldn't involve you. I suggest you step out of other people's business and take your men and go."

The leader just shook his head with contempt. "You think you've got this wired, but you're wrong. We know about Niket and he won't be helping you. Matter of fact, Captain Enyala's already moving in on the kid while we waste our time here."

The smirk on the man's face told Shepard they were missing something. "What do you mean, Niket won't be helping us?"

The merc stepped forward and put a finger in Shepard's face, "Nothing you need to worry about. You walk away now, the girl goes back to her father, and everybody walks away alive."

Miranda growled, "That's not an option, I'm afraid."

The merc shook his head, "Capt Enyala ordered us to give you one chance to walk away, but this whole time we've been talking, my men have been lining up shots. I say the word, and they unleash hell on your squad. I suggest you walk away unless you want things to get ugly."

Shepard laughed. "And you think we haven't been doing the same?" A flicker of doubt crossed the merc's face, but vanished just as quickly, so Shepard continued. "Garrus. You see what I see?"

Garrus responded with chuckle. "Oh, I'm pretty sure I'm on it, Shepard."

Miranda smiled as she drew her pistol and shot the merc accompanying the leader dead on the spot, same time as she uttered, "Works for me."

With Miranda's draw, the bark of a sniper rifle was heard within a fraction of a second. A fuel tank suspended in the back of the room suddenly exploded over the bulk of the Eclipse forces that had stayed back in cover. As gunfire erupted from both sides, the merc team leader beat a hasty retreat while yelling into his comm to have Capt Enyala send reinforcements. Over half his team had been incapacitated or killed with the first two shots of the encounter. It didn't take long for the team to clean out the first group of mercs and they started to advance through the docks. Miranda pushed the
team forward, "Come on! We need to get to Niket!"

As they approached an elevator, they heard the squawk of a radio. Miranda quickly 'acquired' it from the dead merc so they could listen in to Eclipse chatter as they continued to move. As they climbed in the elevator, Miranda hung her head. "I'm a bit concerned by what that merc said. If they've gotten to Niket somehow, this is going to be a lot harder than I'd planned."

Shepard barked out a laugh. "Sorry, Miranda, but you didn't plan on Eclipse, either, so it's already harder. What's one more little twist?"

Miranda's head came up and she actually had a glint in her eye, though didn't join in the laugh. "Oh, Shepard. You do know how to make a person feel better about their screw ups, don't you?"

Shepard smiled lightly. "It's something I picked up from Liara."

As they came out of the elevator, Miranda pointed through a section of the warehouse. "According to the specs I pulled, we'll need to cut through that cargo yard to get to the shuttle station."

Shepard followed her finger. "We'll have to be on our toes. With all the conveyors running, there'll be a lot of noise, motion, and cover. Detecting the mercs might be a challenge. Let's get moving, but stay sharp, people!"

Miranda added in, "And, the cargo transports carry hazardous materials, so watch what you shoot at." She was somewhat concerned when she saw the way Garrus and Shepard grinned at one another following her warning.

As the team moved into the cargo yard, the mercs revealed themselves and started firing; it wasn't so hard to locate them after all. Shepard immediately began laying down cover fire, and Garrus used his scope to start blowing up the hazardous materials canisters. Miranda realized why they exchanged the grin and ducked for cover behind some crates, waiting for all the explosions to stop. By the time the deadly duo quit blowing things up, there were only a couple of mercs left for Miranda and Judea to finish off and the team moved quickly forward. The radio barked, Captain Enyala showing her frustration. *This is Enyala! Keep that bitch back! Niket is nearing the transport terminal!*

Miranda growled and picked up the pace, dragging the rest of the team behind. As they continued to progress at an amazing speed through the Eclipse troops, Enyala got more nervous and shifted all the Eclipse troops except her personal guard to slow Miranda down. Shepard cursed under her breath. "Get ready guys. More troops headed our way."

Miranda grumbled, "There's not enough Eclipse in the galaxy to keep me from Oriana."

Shepard honestly didn't think there was anything in the universe THAT important to Miranda Lawson. She was cheerfully surprised to be wrong.

Shepard and Judea fell right back into the rhythm they established when recruiting Samara, and Shepard's crash and blast, with Judea covering her six, was positively deadly. Garrus comfortably brought up the rear and kept any mercs from flanking Miranda and the team moved through the cargo handling facility like a wildfire pushed by a stiff breeze. As they worked their way through yet one more section, Miranda chimed in, "This is the last section before the elevator to the cargo docks."

Edi was obviously monitoring their progress and communications, because she suddenly cut in, "Eclipse operatives have attempted to delay you by disabling the elevators. I am overriding their lockdown."
The team cleared out the last of the Eclipse and moved to the elevator just as the radio came to life one more time. Enyala's words froze the blood in Miranda's veins. "Niket has reached the passenger terminal. He'll switch the family over to our transport."

The doubt that had been growing since the merc's comments about Niket not helping blossomed into full grown truth and Miranda's step faltered. "Niket? I can't believe he would do that to me!"

Shepard grabbed Miranda's arm and pulled her around, eye to eye. "Don't think about it now, Miranda. Focus on what we need to do to stop them. Worry about Niket later!" Shepard maintained her hold on Miranda until she blinked and her eyes cleared.

Miranda's gaze hardened as she looked at Shepard, her eyes turned to iron. "Right. I'm on it, Shepard. Let's take the assholes down."

Shepard released her hold and punched Miranda lightly on the arm. "That's my girl. Let's get 'er done!"

As the doors opened on the upper level, the team stepped out to an Eclipse merc, assumed to be Captain Enyala, and Niket speaking with a transportation technician, attempting to change Oriana's flight arrangements.

Niket's head came around and he focused on the group stepping out of the elevator. "Miri!"

Enyala stood up from the crate she was sitting on. She had a contemptuous smirk on her face as she took in the arrivals and Niket's obvious discomfort. "This should be fun." She quickly pulled her weapon and pointed it at the group, who slowly started to spread out.

Three of them had their weapons trained on the Eclipse captain, but Miranda was focused on someone entirely different. "You're a son of a bitch, Niket. I never thought you'd betray me. I trusted you, God damn it!"

Niket shook his head. "I didn't betray you, Miranda. I made sure you had an out. They gave you an opportunity to walk away. It's not my fault you didn't take it."

Miranda frowned, "That was never an option. I'm not going to slide away to save my own skin and let them take Oriana!"

Niket shook his head. "You made your own choice, but you took Oriana's option to do the same. She doesn't even know her father. She's old enough to make her own decisions now. You're done making them for her."

"Oh, no, Niket. You think I'm going to let that man get his claws on her after all this time? Put her through the same hell he subjected me to all those years ago?"

Just then, the transportation technician decided the group was distracted enough to try and make a run for it. A bad move, as Captain Enyala's aim shifted slightly to take the tech down without a second thought. Then, before Enyala could get her rifle back to bear on the group, Miranda drilled a shot straight through Niket's forehead. "That's where you're wrong."

The transportation terminal erupted into chaos. Enyala yanked her assault rifle back toward the group and Miranda lit up with biotics, tossing the captain to the other side of the cargo terminal before she ever got a shot off. Enyala lit up with her own biotics and softened her fall, jumping back to her feet ready to fight. A door on the far side opened and reinforcements poured in as the Normandy team dived for cover. There was maybe a dozen mercs and they spread out quickly in an attempt to flank the team. One of them managed to circle around on the team's right flank and Miranda took a hard
Shepard called on her biotics and charged in, taking the merc out and then dragged Miranda into cover. Judea started to follow, then stopped and dived back to her left again, realizing the entire team would have been in the same quadrant and easy to surround. She held position and drew fire to give Shepard time to treat Miranda and get back into the fight.

Garrus had disappeared and Shepard feared the worst until she heard his sniper rifle bark. He had dropped back to a row of crates and worked his way up, setting himself above the floor with an awesome field of view. With his now superior position and armor piercing ammo, every bark of his sniper rifle dropped one of the Eclipse mercs into a heap on the floor. After slapping medigel on Miranda, Shepard also jumped back into the fight and the remainder of the mercenary force was dead within thirty seconds.

Shepard quickly returned to Miranda's side, happy to see she was staying conscious. "Shit, Miranda. We're supposed to be protecting your sister, not showing up to tell her the sister she didn't even know is dead." The shocked look on Miranda's face made Shepard instantly regret her words. "Sorry. That was uncalled for, but when I saw you hit the floor... it scared the hell out of me." Shepard let out an uneasy breath.

Miranda groaned and sat up carefully. "Well, the medigel seems to have done the trick, but I'll still be visiting Dr Chakwas when we get back on board." She grinned at the commander and stuck her hand out for help in getting up. As Shepard hauled her back to her feet, Miranda's eyes twinkled in merriment. "Thank you, Shepard. I didn't know you cared so much."

Shepard growled, but her tone did nothing to mask the blush creeping up her neck. "Give me a break. You're my XO, and a damn good one. I don't have time to train somebody new." She was smiling by the time she finished her statement. "Come on, Lawson. We still have to get to your sister and make sure they get on their transport on time."

As they moved to the next elevator to go to the passenger terminal, Miranda leaned against the wall and took a deep painful breath. "I still can't believe Niket sold me out. He was my closest friend. Hell, my only friend. I never saw that coming."

Shepard laid a hand gently on Miranda's arm. "He's not your only friend, and don't be so hard on yourself, Miranda. Even with all our fancy upgrades, we're still only human. We still make mistakes... and you never want to believe a friend would betray you. Goes against human nature."

Miranda's eyes flashed in anger. "I let it get personal and I screwed up! My father knew what Niket was to me, and he used it against me."

Shepard shook her head. "No. It's just the angle your father picked to use. If not that, he would have found something else. Your humanity... your love for Oriana is what makes all this worth it. Don't lose that because your father is an asshole."

The rage in Miranda's eyes faded. "You're right. With my father, it's always been about the angles. But there was always a hook attached to the lure. Always a trade-off toward his long-term goal. He gave me just about everything I ever wanted, except his love, but he never gave away anything for free." She stood up off the wall as she finished. "I walked away from everything he gave me, tossed it all aside when I ran, I lost everything."

Shepard smiled. "No you didn't. You kept your sister. You kept Oriana safe."

Miranda's face noticeably brightened. "You're right. I still have Oriana, thanks to you."

They stepped out of the elevator into the passenger terminal and Shepard sent Judea and Garrus to
scan for any additional Eclipse mercs while she stayed with Miranda. They took a few steps deeper into the terminal and Miranda froze. "Oh God. There she is. She's safe... with her family."

Shepard looked at the girl who was supposedly Miranda's twin, then looked back at Miranda. "She looks the same as you, but she also looks a lot younger. And Niket mentioned her being old enough 'now' to make her own decisions. Care to explain?"

Miranda actually blushed. "Uhm, yes. I owe you that much. I told you how I was 'created,' not birthed. Well, Oriana is a genetic twin. She was created the same way, using the same DNA, but not until I was a teenager. My father was ... displeased... with how I turned out, so started over. He considered me a failed experiment. Probably would have let me run away without a second thought, if I hadn't grabbed Oriana to take with me. I just couldn't leave her there to face the same things he had put me through. I'm sorry, Shepard. I should have told you all this up front."

Shepard shrugged. "It wouldn't have changed anything, Miranda. You needed my help and you still would have gotten it. From what you've told me about your father... I'm sure Oriana is better off where she is." Shepard gave her a gentle nudge on the shoulder. "Go say hi. I'll hang here and give you some privacy."

Miranda shook her head, "No. I would just complicate her life. We should go."

Shepard's face reflected shock. "What do you mean, complicate her life?" The look on Miranda's face told her everything. "She was so young when you took her, she doesn't even know you exist, does she?"

Miranda frowned, "No. The less she knows about me, the better. She's got a real family. A life. I would just... confuse the issue."

Shepard was incredulous. "That's bullshit, Miranda! She doesn't need any details, but knowing she has a sister who loves her? I can't believe that would be a bad thing. Just can't."

Miranda got a wistful expression as she looked back to Oriana and her family. "I... I guess not."

Shepard let out a light laugh and gave Miranda a gentle shove forward. "Go on. Go talk to her, Miranda. We'll wait here."

Shepard watched just long enough to see the look of wonder cross Oriana's face when her twin got close enough for her to realize she was practically looking in a mirror. They talked quite a while, and when Miranda returned, her eyes glistened with tears. "Thank you, Shepard. That was... magnificent is the only word I can think of to describe it. She's brilliant. More importantly, she's happy. I don't think that would be a bad thing. Just can't."

Shepard stepped up and hugged her. As she released the operative, she smiled. "We all make mistakes, Miranda. It's how we react to them once we recognize them, that defines us." Shepard glanced around the group. "Now, if you don't mind, Judea and I will split and head to the apartment. See what Liara has us doing next. Garrus. You game?"

Garrus stepped up without a moment's hesitation. "Right behind you, Shepard."

"Thanks again, Shepard. Just do me a favor and keep your omnitool on this time. In case there's an emergency." Miranda's eyes pleaded for agreement.

Shepard nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Don't worry. I won't hide from you anymore. Not now that we've
reached an understanding. You'll be able to contact me if you need to.”
With Oriana safely on her way, Miranda turned to head back to the Normandy dock while Shepard, Judea and Garrus headed for the taxi stand to head to the residential district. As they were climbing into the taxi, Shepard jerked her head up. "Liara!"

Judea looked at the commander in surprise. "Shepard? What's the matter?"

Shepard shook her head. "I don't know, Judea. But I just felt a spike of fear...then nothing." Shepard was frantically trying to place a call on her omnitool and getting no response from her bondmate. "Come on, Liara. Answer!" She growled in frustration and didn't want to contemplate why she could no longer sense her bondmate. She didn't realize just how accustomed she had become to the sensation of warmth and calm that had moved in and settled comfortably in a corner of her mind, until it was gone. She closed her eyes as she clenched and unclenched her fists to battle the sense of dread settling over her.

Judea looked worriedly at the commander. "I'm not getting a response from Riana, either."

What followed was the longest taxi ride Shepard ever experienced in her entire life.

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Shepard's heart fell to her stomach when they arrived at the apartment to find it surrounded by squad cars with flashing lights and the entry blocked by a police cordon. She swallowed her fear and spoke to the officer at the doorway. "What's going on?"

The officer faced her, and rather than answer the question, simply stated, "This area's sealed off. Please step back, ma'am."

Shepard scowled, "Sealed off? What the hell happened?"

A powerful and commanding Asari walked down the steps from the master bedroom, speaking as she reached the ground floor. "Someone tried to kill your friend, Commander Shepard."

Shepard breathed an audible sigh of relief. "Tried?" Thank the Gods. That means they weren't successful. "So, where's Liara?"

Shepard assumed the Asari who was speaking was in charge of the police investigation, but she was wrong. The Asari looked around, ignored Shepard's question, and spoke authoritatively, "Thank you, officer. Your people are dismissed."

The officer at the door protested, "You can't do that!"

The Asari just glanced back over her shoulder as she walked toward the large windows in the back of the apartment. "Already done."
The two officers investigating the scene shrugged their shoulders and closed down their omnitools, while the officer at the door threw up her hands in disgust and stalked away from the apartment, with the other two in trail.

The Asari finally turned to Shepard and addressed her directly, "Tela Vasir, Special Tactics and Recon."

That got Shepard's attention, and she stopped walking and faced Vasir. "A Spectre. And you haven't answered my question. Where's Liara?" Shepard thought about Saren; just because Vasir was a Spectre, it didn't mean Shepard was going to trust Vasir with Liara's life.

"I have no idea, Commander." Vasir smiled. "I heard your status was reinstated. Good. You're one of our most famous operatives. Might even get you to sign my chest plate." She hesitated only briefly before continuing. "So, I assume you had business with your friend this evening, Commander."

Shepard nodded. "Yeah, Liara was following up on a lead for me... I was utilizing her Information Brokerage services. Apparently it drew some unwanted attention. What have you got so far?" An expression flashed across Vasir's face that Shepard couldn't quite place, but assumed it was an issue of jurisdiction. Shepard didn't care if Vasir was here first; no way was she walking away from this. She and her crew were helping, whether Vasir wanted it or not.

Vasir surprised her, perhaps reading Shepard's expression in turn, and after a brief but noticeable hesitation started filling her in. "About twenty five minutes ago, someone took a shot at T'Soni. Three actually. She stuck around for almost four minutes before leaving the building. Whatever she was doing must have been important."

Shepard's eyes narrowed, wondering how Vasir would know just how long Liara waited. If she knew that, maybe she knew something else too, something much more important. "If Liara isn't here, where is she? Where'd she go?"

Vasir looked disgusted at the repeated question. "If I knew that, I wouldn't be sifting through her crap. No blood, no body. T'Soni obviously got away. The sniper didn't plan on her kinetic barrier. Clever girl. Paranoid, but clever."

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Again Shepard wondered about Vasir's wealth of information. Why would she mention Liara's kinetic barrier and not just assume the sniper missed? There were any number of reasons for that, like distortions in the glass or bad lighting. Shepard trusted her gut, and her gut told her to not trust Vasir. Shepard thought back to Nyxeris and immediately tensed back up. Just because there wasn't a body didn't mean Liara wasn't dead. "If Liara's alive, she would have left me a message somehow. She was expecting me. Did you find anything on her terminal?" Shepard just assumed Vasir had been in the apartment long enough to have checked it for data.

Vasir shook her head. "Nothing. She wiped her drive with a scrubber before she left. Paranoid and thorough. You know T'Soni better than I do. How would she leave a message just for you?"

Shepard's eyes wandered around the apartment as she tried to put herself in Liara's shoes. "I'm not sure. I'll take a look around and see what strikes me." Shepard wandered the apartment and tried to recall exactly where everything was before, to see if anything at all was different or had been moved. She started in Liara's office. She looked at the computer and based on the runtime for the scrubber, confirmed that it really was Liara that ran the program. Assuming Vasir's reported twenty five minute timeline was correct. Eventually she found herself upstairs in the bedroom and saw a picture of the Normandy sitting on Liara's nightstand. Shepard knew that had to be it, somehow. It didn't belong there... it would be in the way because it was sitting where Liara normally placed her omnitool at night when she went to bed. Shepard picked up the picture and it must have been keyed to her DNA;
the minute she touched it, the picture changed from the Normandy. Shepard sighed once more in relief and smiled. *She IS alive!* Vasir suddenly appeared at her side and asked what it was. Shepard reluctantly answered, "It's one of her Prothean dig sites. She did leave me a message. Now, I just need to find it."

Shepard hustled back downstairs and started searching all the display cabinets holding Prothean relics, running her hands over all the surfaces, Vasir watching her like a hawk. If the picture was keyed to her DNA, chances were something else was as well. Eventually she found one that had a data disk tucked in a concealed drawer, which opened as her hand passed over it. She glanced at Garrus, "I've got something here." She walked it to the office and dropped it into Liara's terminal; everyone followed her, including Vasir. It was a recording of a call with a Salarian named Sekat, talking about narrowing something down to a specific system. The call didn't specifically state it, but Shepard knew it was the location of the Shadow Broker base. She saw no need to reveal that particular information to Vasir. More importantly in the short term, they now knew where Liara was headed. Shepard's head popped up as Vasir spoke, not realizing the Asari had been watching over her shoulder. "I'm sure Liara went to Sekat's office in the Dracon Trade Center. I know where that is. My car's outside."

Not wanting Vasir to get a head start, they followed her to the car and piled in, immediately heading across town. As they arrived and climbed out of the car, Vasir volunteered that Sekat's office in Baria Frontiers would be on the third floor. She looked around. "I don't hear police chatter, and there's no cars. We must have missed the party."

Shepard disagreed. "No, we beat them to the punch or the cops would still be here. They were still at Liara's apartment... if anything happened here yet, they'd still be here as well."

Just then, a massive series of explosions ripped through the building, blowing them back off their feet. Shepard quickly jumped up, feeling a pressure wave that was separate and distinct from what she just experienced, and knew Liara was alive...and inside the building that just got blown to hell. "Liara!"

She heard the chorus of Judea and Garrus behind her, urging her to press into the building. Vasir scoffed, "They just took out three floors to make sure she's dead! I'll grab the skycar and seal off the building from the top!"

As Vasir took off running, Shepard mumbled under her breath. "Dead, my ass. You don't know my Liara!" Already in motion, Shepard's voice raised and she hollered at her team, "We'll start down here and work our way up!"

The threesome ran into the building to go find Shepard's bondmate. A quick glance around the ground floor told Shepard for sure this was no random bombing. This was carried out with thoughts toward maximum damage. She got on the comms, "The elevators are out and building security is down."

Vasir was chattering at the same time, still fishing for information. "No alarms, no police. Very professional. What's your friend into, Shepard?"

Shepard opted to not answer the question, instead replying, "A lot of innocent people got caught in the explosion. It may have been professional, but it wasn't a clean hit. Messy. Destructive. No care for collateral damage... and no regard for life."

Vasir made what seemed to be an off-hand comment, "I wouldn't take any bets on T'Soni's informant surviving that blast." Shepard could give a rat's ass about her informant. For some reason, she just wanted to find Liara before Vasir did.
The team quickly located a staircase and started working their way up. On the second floor, they
found some unexploded ordinance. Shepard growled, "Military-grade. It hasn't been armed."

Garrus grunted, "Sloppy work. You use that kind of hardware when you don't have time to plan.
You're right...they went for mass, not precision."

As they got to the second floor, they found the company they were looking for. "Vasir. Where are
you? I'm at the Baria Frontiers office. We're heading in!"

Vasir acknowledged but gave no indication of her location. "Understood, Commander."

They rolled in the door and around the corner and were immediately assaulted with flash grenades.
Shepard cussed as she was temporarily blinded and her ears ran loudly from the explosion. The team
dove for cover and Shepard called out, "Shit! Mercs... and they're well armed!" Shepard waited for
her vision to clear and prepared to wage war. The minute she could see clearly, she started blasting
away with her shotgun while advancing from cover to cover, working her way quickly through the
office cubicles. No way would a few mercs keep her from her bondmate. As soon as Judea and
Garrus could also see and managed to catch up with her, she slipped into her 'crash and blast' mode.
None of the mercs were prepared to withstand a biotic charge, and the team cleared the room quickly
and moved forward down a long hallway to the next office area.

The second group of mercs had some engineers with them with attack drones, along with some
rocket troops. It was a bit more of a challenge, but still nothing the team couldn't handle with relative
easy. They had more trouble when they rolled around the corner to the stairwell, and they faced
burning gas pipes. Searching the floor for the fire suppression system controls ate precious time and
Shepard was starting to consider charging through and leaving the team behind when Garrus called
out. "Got it, Shepard!"

A few moments later and the stairwell was clear; the team quickly climbed to the third floor and went
on the hunt for Sekat's office. After a few more mercs that hardly even slowed the team down, they
approached their final destination. As Shepard moved toward the doorway, she heard a gunshot on
the other side, quickly followed by a second shot. The team rushed the door to see a merc collapsing,
just after Vasir had shot him in the back of the head.

Vasir holstered her pistol and commented rather nonchalantly, "Damn it. If either of us had been a
few seconds faster, we could've stopped them."

Shepard knelt down next to a Salarian leaning against the wall. "Damn. This looks like the guy in the
video. This must be Sekat."

Vasir agreed readily. "Must be."

Shepard searched the body. "No sign of that data Liara talked about. Looks like a dead end."

As Shepard stood up, she sensed Liara nearby, though she couldn't pinpoint exactly where.

Vasir turned and looked around the room. "Speaking of which, did you find your friend's body?"

Shepard was about to retort they wouldn't be finding a body when suddenly she realized Liara was
closing fast from behind. She turned with a smile that quickly vanished when she saw the expression
on Liara's face... and the fact that she had a weapon drawn, pointed at Vasir.

Liara growled, "You mean this body?"

Trusting her bondmate completely, Shepard spun and pulled her weapon, along with Garrus and
Judea, all pointing at Vasir.

With a quick glance and a flash of a satisfied smile at Shepard's reaction, Liara explained her actions. "This is the woman who tried to kill me."

Vasir sounded smug. "You've had a rough day, so I'll let that slide. Why don't you put that gun down?"

Liara scoffed, "I saw you! I doubled back after I left. I watched you break into our apartment!"

"I knew something was off but couldn't put my finger on it. You didn't know where Liara went, so you used me to find the message you knew she would leave for me." Shepard frowned as the full realization dawned. "Damn it! Sorry, Li. I led her right fucking to you."

Vasir no longer tried to deny it. She shrugged her shoulders and simply said, "Thanks for the help."

Liara started nodding. "Of course. Once she had my location, she signaled the Shadow Broker's forces and they bombed the building to take me out. She knew you'd head straight here, so they had no time for subtlety. She found Sekat, took his data, and killed him. I'm guessing she still has the disk on her."

Vasir sneered, "Good guess. Not that you'll ever see what's on it..." With that, she pulled on her biotics, shattering the window behind her and launching the glass shards toward the team as she finished out her statement with a yell. "You pureblood bitch!" She spun on her heels and prepared to jump out the window.

The reactions between the archeologist and the soldier were completely different. Liara quickly dropped to a knee and threw up a barrier to protect the group from the flying glass. Shepard, on the other hand, threw her arm up to protect her face and the second Vasir turned to run, the commander was off at a sprint to take her down. They raced to the window and Shepard dived to tackle Vasir before she made good on her escape. Unfortunately, their momentum carried them forward and they rolled, both grappling for an advantage, out the third story window.

Liara bolted to her feet and screamed, "Shepard!" as she ran to the window.

Vasir lit up her biotics and slowed their descent, and as they approached the ground managed to give Shepard a hard kick, smashing her onto the concrete at ground level with enough force to knock the air out of her lungs. Vasir landed beside her and her face lit with a malicious smile as she called on her biotics to finish the vulnerable commander off with a warp. She never got the chance as Liara beat her to the punch, launching her own warp at Vasir before taking a couple of shots with her pistol, then leaping out the window to follow them down to the ground, Judea hot on her heels.

Being without biotics, Garrus had no option but to stop and pull out his sniper rifle. Added on top of what Liara had already thrown at Vasir, a single shot from Garrus dropped her shield, so Vasir was forced to drop the warp so she could pull up her biotic barrier. Looking at the number of pursuers, Vasir took off running.

When Liara hit the ground, she started toward Shepard. As they made eye contact, she got a flash through the link. Go! Don't lose her...I'll catch up! Suddenly the chase was on. Mere moments behind, Judea stopped and dragged Shepard to her feet, and they took off in trail, hoping to get back into the fight. Garrus cussed aloud and headed for the roof, hoping to find Vasir's skycar on the pad.

Vasir cleared a doorway and ran into a building, just as two Shadow Broker soldiers came out. Liara didn't even break stride, slamming both of them off to the side and continuing her pursuit. Unfortunately, before Shepard and Judea got there, a second door opened and more mercs poured
out into the courtyard, pinning them down. Garrus solved the problem rather nicely when he suddenly dropped Vasir's car on their heads. Jumping out to join the fight, he had to yell at the other two to get them moving... they were staring at him in shock. Garrus chuckled, "What? So I picked up a couple of driving tips from you and the Mako! Come on, let's go! Which door?"

Shaking themselves out of their stupor, the team took off again, following Liara's path. There wasn't a lot for them to do other than follow the trail of dead bodies and weapons fire. They ran into a few stragglers, but nothing to significantly slow them. They finally emerged out the other side of the building to see Vasir jump into a car and take off. Liara cursed, "Damn it!"

Shepard wasted no time jumping into a second car and yelling at her team mates, "Come on! We can still catch her!" The car was in the air and moving before the doors closed.

Garrus was already complaining as he climbed into the back. "How come you get to drive?"

Shepard laughed, "Weren't you just saying something about picking up tips from me driving the Mako?"

Garrus chuckled, "Yeah, but those tips involved killing things. I'd actually prefer to survive this car ride if you don't mind."

As Shepard accelerated and jumped out into traffic, Liara cut off their light-hearted jesting. "Garrus. If you don't mind, I'd prefer she focus on driving rather than talking!" Liara couldn't help but call out, "Hang a right! No, wait, left!"

Shepard remained silent, concentrating on getting the most speed she could in order to keep up with Vasir.

Suddenly, Liara's voice sounded a bit frantic. "We're not going into the construction site, are....oh, Goddess!"

Shepard focused completely on her driving, dodging building columns, wall partitions and various pieces of equipment, all while trying to keep tabs on their target. Liara was completely silent, and Shepard wanted to glance over to see if she even had her eyes open, but dared not look away from their cluttered path for even a fraction of a second. As they blasted out the other side, they hooked a hard right and entered into a tunnel and oncoming traffic. Liara was surprisingly focused and calm. "We can't let her escape with that data!"

They got into a particularly busy section of the city and Vasir had them weaving in and out between numerous vehicles. Liara's voice rose to a fever pitch, "Traffic! Oncoming traffic!"

Shepard pushed calming thoughts to her bondmate as she spoke, "We'll be fine, Liara. I'm on it. This handles much better than the Mako ever did."

Liara shouted out, "Goddess! Now she's dropping proximity charges!"

Shepard grinned as she whispered, "I noticed, thanks."

As they wheeled around a corner and entered another tunnel, they were overtaken by troop carriers. Liara's voice had returned to an even keel, but she still insisted on announcing the obvious. "Lovely, now she has reinforcements."

Shepard quipped, "What kinds of guns does this thing have?"

Garrus chuckled in the back. "It's a taxi, Shepard. Though that is a really good idea. I'm sure we
could market that. We could advertise... You'll never be late to the spaceport again!"

As they screamed around a corner in the tunnel, Liara called out "Truck!"

Shepard yanked the car over to dodge the large obstacle in front of them, just as one of the troop transports blasted the truck and it turned into a fiery mass that crashed and slid sideways, blocking most of the tunnel. Liara once again yelled "Truck!" and then just plain screamed as they converged quickly on the burning vehicle.

Shepard yanked the wheel back the other way, putting the car up on its side, squeaking though a small gap that remained for clear passage. Shepard had a huge grin on her face. "Ha! There we go!"

Liara looked at her bondmate with astonishment, "You're enjoying this!"

Shepard just shrugged and punched it, accelerating even more as they emerged from the last tunnel.

Liara shuddered, "A head-on collision at this speed..." She couldn't even finish the statement.

Shepard tried to relax her a bit with humor and sarcasm, replying drolly, "Yeah. I've heard those can be bad for you."

As they screamed through the city, once again Liara called out, "Truck!"

Shepard was starting to lose her patience, and grumbled, "Again?"

Liara yelled, "Watch out!"

Shepard deftly avoided a collision with a hard bank to the right and actually gained some ground on Vasir as the momentum from their turn slingshot them forward. The additional speed Shepard had managed to coax out of the taxi finally paid off, and they pulled up even with Vasir. As soon as she realized they had caught up to her, she sideswiped them. After a few hard bumps back and forth, Shepard managed to shove Vasir into a near head-on collision that severely damaged her car and forced her to crash land on the top of a hotel. While Shepard circled around to a clear zone on the same rooftop, Vasir managed to tumble out of her car and call for reinforcements, before limping into the building.

As soon as Shepard set the car down, the team rolled out, Liara pushing them along. "Come on, she can't have gotten far!"

Just then, a troop transport dropped in with four mercs on board. Liara dropped a singularity into the middle of them, which Shepard biotically charged into, causing it to explode and send the mercs flying in every direction. A quick couple of shotgun blasts later and they were all dead. They had to repeat the pattern three more times before they finally made it to Vasir's car. None of the mercs were terribly hard to kill, they just took time. Time that allowed Vasir to get that much farther away. Liara took a glance at the car as they passed by it, "A blood trail. Vasir got hurt in the crash."

Shepard nodded. "Good. That will slow her down some and make her easy to follow."

They started following the blood trail and it led them through a series of rooms, one of which had a large screen that covered almost an entire wall... showing images that made Shepard very curious. "Just what kind of hotel is this place?"

Liara blushed, "Azure. It's a luxury resort with an... exotic edge. 'Azure' is also slang for a part of the Asari body in some areas of Illium."
Shepard's face also picked up a tinge of pink, and she couldn't stop herself from asking, "Where?"

Liara really blushed, as she squeaked out her response, "Mainly the lower reaches, near the bottom."

Shepard grumbled, "I meant, where on the Asari body?"

Liara almost fainted as she turned even darker. "So did I."

Shepard was still transfixed by what was before her on the screen and her blush now matched her bondmate's. "Oh... uhm... sorry for the misinterpretation."

While Judea was trying hard not to laugh at the couple's discomfort, Garrus cleared his throat, "We probably should keep moving, don't you think?"

The group let out a collective sigh of relief for the reminder of the task at hand and pressed on. They followed the trail of blood and dead bodies that Vasir left in her wake and eventually caught up to her at an open-air restaurant, still within the hotel.

Liara was the first to see her and growled out, "Vasir! It's over!"

Vasir spun and grabbed the nearest waitress and put a pistol to her head, using her as both a body shield and a hostage.

Shepard quickly drew her own weapon in response and stared Vasir down over her pistol; Shepard's hand rock-steady, with the sights focused on Vasir's forehead. "Even if you get out of here, you'll lose your Spectre status. You attacked the trade center!"

Even after all that had happened, Vasir was still smug. "You think so? I think maybe Cerberus terrorists did that. Which story do you think the Council will believe?" Vasir paused for a mere fraction of time before growling, "All you had to do was walk away, Shepard. Now it gets ugly."

Shepard's eyes narrowed to mere slits and she literally growled back, the threatening grumble coming from deep in her throat. "Now it gets ugly? It got ugly when you blew up the trade center and killed all those innocent people!"

Liara added on, "I'm going to end you, Vasir."

Shepard gave her bondmate a quick glance and spoke boldly, "It's ok, Liara. We'll handle it. The usual way."

Vasir wasn't giving an inch, and when she responded, her voice was sickeningly patronizing. "You want this woman's son to grow up without a mommy, Shepard? Thermal clips on the ground, now. Power cells, too."

While they were talking, Judea had slipped off to the left flank and Garrus had worked his way to a balcony vantage point. He keyed into the team's private comm channel. "Shepard, I'm ready when you are."

Shepard actually laughed. "Vasir, you seem to be forgetting something. I'm a Spectre too. Whatever it takes for the mission, right? Besides. You're pathetic...hiding behind a hostage. No stomach for a real fight? I'm going to kill your hostage, Vasir." Shepard refused to wince when she saw tears running down the hostage's face. She continued smoothly, "And then I'm going to show you how a real Spectre gets things done."

Vasir's pistol came off the hostage and pointed at Shepard. That's all she was waiting for and spoke...
quickly to her bondmate. "Now, Liara!"

Suddenly, Vasir and the waitress were blindsided by one of the dining tables. Liara lifted it and
smashed it into them, sending them both sprawling. The minute Vasir hit the ground, away from the
hostage, Garrus' sniper rifle barked and Vasir's head exploded like a melon.

Liara holstered her pistol and calmly went to Vasir's body, searching all the pockets. She stood back
up when she found what she was looking for. She glanced at Shepard as she spoke, "Sekat's
personal datadisk. This should have what we need to find the Shadow Broker."

They retreated to a quiet corner to review the data. It turned out it wasn't only Sekat's information,
but Vasir's as well. The first thing they heard was the Shadow Broker. "Eliminate T'Soni and retrieve
the data. Civilian casualties not a concern."

As the first two words rolled out, Shepard stepped close, wrapped her arms around Liara's waist and
appreciatively took in a deep breath of eezo and Thessian rose off her very much alive bondmate.
"Son of a bitch. He's a dead man. No one puts a hit on my bondmate and lives to talk about it."

Liara stepped away and gave Shepard an appreciative glance before she started walking. "I'm putting
the data through to the Normandy's computers. We can be at the Shadow Broker's base in a few
hours. He'll know about Vasir before long. If he decides to kill Feron..."

Shepard cut her off, not wanting her to finish that sentence. "We won't give him time."

Liara glanced again at Shepard as she continued, "We'll need the Normandy's stealth systems to get
us in close undetected."

"Of course. The Normandy's at your disposal." The commander's mind jumped forward; Liara had
no commandos available, so Shepard had to decide who from the team would go on the ground
mission. She suddenly drew up short, thinking about the commandos. She caught Liara's arm and
stopped her. "Shit, Liara. I can't believe I didn't think of this sooner... Li..." Shepard hesitated, not
sure she wanted the answer to the question she was about to ask. "Where's Riana?"

Liara smiled at Shepard's thoughtfulness and gave her a quick peck on the cheek as she started
walking again. "She's fine, Shepard. Or at least, she will be. She was injured in the blast at the trade
center. She knew I had to move quickly and that she wouldn't be able to keep up, so she stayed
behind to get medical treatment. She's probably back at the apartment by now."

Shepard's tension oozed out with the news. "Thank the Gods for small favors." Shepard directed her
next comments to Judea. "I wanted you with us on the Normandy, but now I need you to check on
Riana...and have the Aletheia and a full commando squad ready to move if necessary. Let's get this
show on the road." Grudgingly agreeing with the reasoning, Judea moved off in the opposite
direction to head back to the apartment.

Having lost all semblance of control, Aethyta yelled, "What the fuck, Tevos? Her apartment is shot
to shit, the Trade Center blown to hell, there was a running gunfight from the business center all the
way through the entertainment district, with a dead Council Spectre at the end of it all! Where the
hell is my daughter?"

Tevos remained amazingly calm. "Thyta, I don't know what to tell you. Spectre Vasir was not
operating on any Council orders that I know of. I have no idea why she was on Illium."

Aethyta snarled menacingly, "Well, I'll tell you one thing. The Normandy was here, and now it's not.
I don't believe in coincidences, and knowing where that ship is going, I don't want my daughter on it! You'd better find Shepard and find out what the hell is going on!" Her voice dropped to an even lower growl, "And let me tell you something. If Liara isn't on the Normandy... If a Council Spectre had anything to do with her..." Aethyta's voice broke and she couldn't bring herself to say the word 'death.' She had to pause briefly before she continued. "... her disappearance, there will be hell to pay."

Tevos raised her eyes at the threat, and her voice reflected admonishment, like she was speaking to a petulant child as she stretched out the name. "Aethyta. You know I care deeply for Liara and Shepard and would wish them no ill. I will find out what Vasir was supposed to be doing, but you can't go off on a Krogan blood rage. It just won't help the cause any. I'm sure Shepard interfered with whatever was happening and the Normandy left because she is spiriting Liara away to safety. I promise I'll let you know as soon as I find anything."

Aethyta leaned menacingly into the screen. "You damn well better!" She reached over and punched the disconnect button without letting Tevos reply.

On the Normandy, the team met in the conference room and Shepard yielded the floor to her bondmate, surprising everyone who didn't know who Liara was. Dr T'Soni, Information Broker, quickly gave the executive summary on the Shadow Broker's assistance to the Collectors, the 'kidnapping' of Commander Shepard, and Cerberus' bold 'rescue.' Those in the know were barely able to suppress their surprise at Liara's unblinking delivery of the revised tale, but those not in the loop just took it as the same shock they had with the revelations. Liara then explained the mission...they had finally discovered the location of the Shadow Broker's main base, and they were prepared to take him out of the equation. There was a side note involving another raid similar to what happened on Illium, where one of Liara's agents, a Drell named Feron, was successfully captured and believed to be somewhere on the Shadow Broker ship. The mission also involved his rescue, should they find the Drell alive. In the stunned silence that followed, Shepard stepped back in.

"Given the nature of our adversary, this is a purely volunteer mission, but based on the size of the force we faced on Illium and the fact we'll be facing them on their home turf, I'd like a minimum of six people... If you don't want to volunteer, I ask you leave the room now, and the rest of us will plan." Shepard and Liara were awed and humbled when nobody budged...even Miranda and Jacob stayed, in spite of what Miranda had previously stated about them being unable to get involved. They would be hitting the Shadow Broker with all twelve ground crew members.

Shepard briefed the attack plan. They would divide into three teams of four, with Shepard, Miranda and Garrus being team leads. Garrus' and Miranda's teams would utilize the IFF stripped from Vasir's ship on Illium to gain access via shuttle to the docking bay. They would immediately clear the hangar so the Broker couldn't attempt to space them, and slowly work their way forward. "Be safe! Your main purpose is to pose enough of a threat to draw the majority of forces away from the holding cells and the main Broker facilities. In short, you're our diversion, but feel free to clean house if the force presented against us isn't as strong as we believe it will be. My team of four will gain access via a maintenance hatch and attempt to locate and free Feron, then find and remove the Shadow Broker. Once we do that, we'll move back toward you and pinch the remaining broker forces between us. I'm sending details, team breakdowns, and the schematics for the Broker ship to all your omnitools. Report to the shuttle bay in one hour and we'll try to answer any questions you may have before we launch our attack."

As the team filed out, Shepard caught Miranda's attention and signaled her to wait. Once everyone left, Shepard just had to ask. "Miranda. I distinctly remember you saying you wouldn't be able to
Miranda looked her straight in the eye. "The Illusive Man wants the Broker's assets after we take him down, so he actually wants Jacob and me on the mission."

Shepard's face flashed with anger. "There is no way in hell I'll give that man the kind of power vested in that network... You have to realize that by now, don't you?"

Miranda nodded. "Yes, Shepard, we do. Jacob and I are in agreement with you on that. So, I'll need Liara's and your help to come up with a credible cover story when this is all done, as to why we couldn't take control of the network."

After thanking Miranda for her openness and honesty, Shepard and Liara retreated to the loft. While they were in the elevator, Liara looked at Shepard and spoke hesitantly. "Either Miranda is an extremely good actress, or you've done wonders with her, Shepard." Shepard smirked and raised her eyebrows but said nothing, waiting on Liara to elaborate. "I almost believe she no longer supports the Illusive Man."

Shepard smiled. "I didn't do anything other than show her the shit he's done and the results that he's gotten from his actions. Miranda's smart, and she's seen TIM's not really that much different than her father. Anything either one of them says is a twisted version of the truth, molded to meet their needs, damn the consequences."

Liara shook her head. "Do you trust her, Shepard?" Liara looked at the commander, wanting to see the expressions that went along with the words.

Shepard smiled at the gorgeous blue orbs so astutely observing her. "Yeah, I think I do. She's been nothing but honest with me, particularly since we hit Illium that first time. I think that was when she realized TIM is a lying sack of shit."

Liara laughed as the elevator door opened. She took Shepard's hand and walked to the loft door. "You and your human idioms. There is no end to them nor their entertainment value."

The minute the loft door closed behind them, Liara used her grip on Samantha's hand to spin her and push her back against the fish tank. Her blue eyes flashed with conflicting worry about the upcoming mission and her desire, as she pressed her body into Shepard's, finally finding the unabridged contact she sought way back when Shepard had first stepped into her office on Illium a day ago. Liara's eyes closed and she rested against Samantha as she felt strong arms surround her in a web of protectiveness. Cheek to cheek, Liara whispering in her lover's ear. "Goddess. We've been up for almost twenty-four hours straight, and spent a good portion of it fighting. And we're turning around and jumping right back in, with no rest. All I want to do is strip you naked to sleep skin-on-skin for twelve hours and then wake up in your arms."

Shepard relished in the contact, nuzzled against Liara and gently kissed her neck, before sighing and whispering back. "That sounds like a very enticing idea, Blue. Too bad we have less than an hour to fit that into. When we're done, however, I would love to take you up on that offer. I think it's a date."

Liara reluctantly stood upright and forced herself away from the commander with a groan. "Yes. Well, first things first, then. We haven't eaten anything all day, and I definitely need to replenish my energy. You have anything here, or do we need to go down to the mess?"

"I always have something in here. It will just be energy bars and electrolyte replenishment drinks, though. Good enough?" With a nod from Liara, Shepard grabbed her hand and they walked down to the couches on the lower level. While Liara dropped, exhausted, into a seat, Shepard grabbed her
stash and spread the selection out on the coffee table, allowing Liara first dibs. Shepard hesitated only briefly before speaking her mind...something that had been bugging her since she realized what she had done. "Liara, I..." Liara could sense the tumble of thoughts in Shepard's mind, but waited for her bondmate to verbalize them the way she wanted them to be heard. "I am so sorry for last night. You were missing and I obviously didn't think my actions through. I basically told Vasir right where you'd be. Riana getting hurt, all those people killed... That's all on me." Shepard hung her head in self-disgust as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Shepard..." Liara dropped the energy bar from her hand and cupped her bondmate's face in her hands, wiping away the tears with the pads of her thumbs. "That was not your fault. Don't take that upon yourself. You heard the Broker's message to Vasir. It was going to happen one way or another. At least this way you came with a full squad and they didn't corner just me alone somewhere." Liara shook her head. "It was a tough enough fight as it was, with the four of us. I can't imagine if I'd been by myself. I don't believe I would have survived. If nothing else, you are certainly a master of finding and selecting the lesser evils. I'd trust no one else with the decisions you are so often forced to make."

Shepard looked at the remarkable Asari in front of her. "Li. You're certainly not the shy archeologist I left behind two years ago. You've grown so much. You amaze me more every day. Without you, I'd... well, first off I wouldn't even be here, but... I don't know what I'd do without you. You're my rock. My anchor. My reason for living." Shepard's guilt tumbled away as she continued. "I need your reminders that I can only do so much, that I am only liable for what I can actually control. And somehow, you make it so I don't feel horribly responsible when I fall short. You keep me from being buried in my own guilt. I love who you've become."

Liara combated her embarrassment with humor, placing a quick peck on Shepard's lips then smacking her cheeks gently with both hands as she drew away. "And you've done the exact same thing for me, I don't know how many times. Besides, that's what I'm here for. To prop up the great Commander Shepard when she decides she's nothing but a little tin soldier." Liara returned to her energy bar and her drink. "Now eat, tin soldier. So you'll be ready to go with me to kick some Shadow Broker butt."
Secrets and Shadows

Chapter Notes

IFF - Identification of Friend or Foe

For a supposed garden world, Hagalaz was remarkably unwelcoming. Its day-night cycles were ninety-eight hours long and the daily temperature swings were 130 degrees. The planet's open waters constantly flipped between a state of freezing and boiling, and the extreme differences in day and night temperatures placed the atmosphere in a constant state of turmoil, with horrific thunder and lightning storms that followed the dusk and dawn lines. The Shadow Broker ship rode that twilight band, hidden amidst the electrical maelstrom, impossible to detect unless one knew exactly where to look.

At the appointed hour, the team assembled in the shuttle bay. Not surprising, Liara's electronic brief was very thorough and no one had any questions about the plan. There was no sense in delaying, so they launched the mission with bated breath, not exactly sure what their near future would hold. The shuttle made a low pass and the four-man infiltration team jumped out, mag-boots engaging the minute they touched down on the deck. Not stopping, the shuttle continued its flight to the rear hanger, hoping no one noticed the four bodies that leapt from its door. The IFF worked like a champ and the shuttle passengers breathed a collective sigh of relief as the rear doors opened. They were on the Shadow Broker ship; now the fun began.

The infiltration team hit the deck as the storm constantly exploded around them. Shepard looked at her team and hoped Grunt wasn't so big that he became a lightning rod. Jack was tiny by comparison and refused to wear armor, so she didn't have a lick of metal on her other than her weapons, and in this case, the mag-boots. Shepard had to laugh; Jack looked rather funny with giant mag-boots on her diminutive frame and not one other stitch of armor. It made her feet eight sizes too big for her body, but Shepard knew better than to say anything out loud. Liara 'heard' her through their link and gave her a look that yelled 'now is not the time' and Shepard's laugh quieted to a small smirk.

Liara broke the silence, "It's hard to pinpoint in this lightening, but I'm picking up signals from a communications array somewhere at the back of the ship. The IFF worked! The shuttle is in!"

Relief swept the team... they were not alone. Shepard responded, "Great! So we just need to find the hatch and get in before one of us gets fried. Let's move." As they moved along the deck, the wind constantly buffeted them and the deck bucked beneath their feet from the constant turbulence. They hadn't gotten very far before maintenance drones popped up and started to attack them. Liara yelled something about the team being storm debris that needed to be 'removed' and Shepard yelled out "I am NOT junk!" as she pulled on her biotics and blasted the first drone into oblivion. Jack quickly dispatched a second one with her SMG, but two more popped up almost immediately. Liara warped one as Shepard charged again to eliminate the second, then waited for the team to regroup. As Grunt caught up, he was grumbling under his breath about not having any fun. Shepard punched him on the shoulder as she yelled to be heard above the wind, "Don't worry, Grunt. We're saving your ammo for the Shadow Broker army awaiting us inside. You'll be front man with me at that point." That brought a toothy grin to the young Krogan's face as the team continued to press forward.
The shuttle bay teams rolled out and immediately had to clear the docking bay of Broker forces. The Normandy crew was a formidable force, with Garrus leading Jacob, Thane and Samara, and Miranda leading Zaeed, Kasumi and Mordin. There were a number of Broker shuttles locked down on the deck, and they started to get an idea of just how large a force the Broker commanded. There were two doors leading forward, one on each side of the ship, so the two teams immediately split and stepped into separate hallways. Miranda's team took the left doorway and could already hear the clamor of armored feet running their way. The interior hallways offered plenty of cover and the team split two to a side, utilizing available bulkhead supports. Zaeed growled out, "Good. Getting right to business. No wondering about when they're going to try to blindside us."

Miranda followed without delay, shouting, "Heavy weapon!" Everyone on the team ducked into cover as a rocket screamed up the hallway. As soon as it impacted on a wall in front of Miranda, Mordin launched an incineration attack and one of the four attackers crumbled into a burning pile in the middle of the passage. Kasumi cloaked and reappeared in their backfield, quickly taking down the rocket troop, giving her three teammates much more freedom to maneuver. With only two more Broker agents, they fell quickly, one to a Miranda warp and the other to Zaeed's precise gunfire. As they advanced to the next position, Kasumi thought aloud, "I wonder how many guards the Shadow Broker has? It can't be any more than Hock...and they can't fly a gunship in here!"

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Shepard's team had been moving along the edge of the ship, but the path ended and they were forced to go higher, up to a centerline gangway edged with all the lightning capacitors. Jack paused momentarily, and yelled at the resident Asari scientist. "How the hell are we supposed to get past those without getting struck by fucking lightning?"

Liara paused the group while she answered. "They aren't lightening rods, they're capacitors designed to discharge the electrical build up. If you shoot them with any type of power weapon or hit them with biotics, they should overload and discharge on whatever's close to them. Do it from a distance and you'll have a short period of time to get past them safely before they have too much charge built up again."

Grunt bobbed his head in excitement. "Cool. Explosions. Can I test one?" He was staring at the first bank of capacitors with a gleam in his eye and a finger twitching on the trigger of his shotgun. Just then, a trio of Broker forces ran up a ramp on the far side and Grunt let his shotgun do the talking. He shot one of the capacitors and the resultant discharge quickly killed the three visible troops. Grunt complained. "Rats. That was just a tiny electrical storm. Nothing blew up!"

Jack laughed, "Yeah, but did you see 'em all do the twitch dance as it shocked the shit out of 'em!"

Shepard scowled at the two. "Just make sure it's not one of us doing the dance. Be careful around those things... and certain don't duck behind one and use it as cover!"

After crossing the first bank of capacitors, the path lead back down to the edge of the ship, where the team quickly ran afoul of some mechs. Apparently the Broker had realized someone or something was on the deck and had destroyed the maintenance drones, so he was starting to dispatch more autonomous forces to solve the problem. Jack tossed out a pull, intending to throw the mech off the side, but there was no need. She yelled out in glee when the mech left the deck just to have the wind from the storm rip the mech out of her grasp and toss it into the clouds, where it was instantly turned to ash by atmospheric power discharges. "You guys see that? That was SWEET!"

There were still two more mechs and an additional drone that still had to be dealt with, but the team learned quickly. Shepard charged the closest mech, Liara tossed the second, and Grunt rumbled forward and blasted the remaining drone with his shotgun. The path turned back to the center of the
ship again and the upper gangplank was once again defended by live broker forces. Grunt quickly ran up the ramp, only to be disappointed by a laughing Jack as she literally pulled the enemy out from in front of him, tossing the trooper to the supercharged void. Grunt's disappointment didn't last long as two more troops charged in when Grunt rounded the corner at the top of the ramp. As he engaged the first, he started taking fire from the second. With a yell to Grunt, Shepard charged in to launch the only one she could see, as Grunt shifted to the second target. After both enemies were destroyed, Grunt's toothy grin turned to Shepard. "Thanks, Battlemaster! That second pyjak was getting annoying."

Shepard and Grunt stood at the top of the ramp temporarily stymied; the path forward had unexpectedly ended, completely blocked by a set of capacitors. Liara's face wore a frown. "These shouldn't be here." She referred to her data file on the Broker ship and she quickly found the information she needed. "Shepard. There should be a switch of some kind that will retract the capacitors. These are only backups for if the primaries fail. The Broker forces must have activated them solely to block our progress."

After a brief search, Jack was the one to call out that she had found a rotating power switch. She gave it a tug and turned it, then pushed it back down. The minute it locked back into position, the capacitors discharged and began to retract, allowing the team to once again move forward.

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Garrus' team breached the right door and also heard the thump of boots moving rapidly toward them. They also heard the Broker over the ship-wide comm system. "Hold your positions, no matter the cost."

Garrus chuckled, "Well, I guess we know it's an all or nothing deal. Give no quarter."

Thane quickly surveyed the environment. "There's plenty of cover, I suggest a step approach. We divide into pairs and one pair advances while the next provides cover fire."

Garrus agreed. "Sounds good. Thane, you're with me and we move first. Ready?"

With nods all around, they pressed forward and quickly closed on the enemy. They first encountered just three standard troopers, but conditions went downhill fast. The corridor zigzagged its way forward and as they tried to work around the second turn they encountered a much larger force and the first thing they did was roll a bunch of flash-bangs down the hallway. As Garrus cussed, Samara responded with a moving barrier wall and pushed them all right back at the Broker agents. In the ensuing chaos, the Normandy team easily moved through the next few turns in the passage.

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The path on the exterior of the ship actually crossed over the top and for the first time the team found themselves on the starboard side of the ship. The path doubled back and ended at the top of a staircase. As Shepard turned toward the stairs, the back of her barrier was riddled with weapons fire. She dropped into a roll and attempted to find cover before her barriers dissolved. Liara surged forward in anger and fear for her bondmate and quickly saw three mechs emerging from concealed positions. They actually set an ambush! In a rage, she grabbed the closest one in a lift and threw it hard off the side. Grunt charged in and crushed the second, and Jack lifted the third into oblivion before Shepard even managed to get out of the line of fire. Liara's focus immediately shifted to the commander and she spoke through the meld, not wanting the rest of the team to pick up on her concern. {Shepard? Are you all right?}

The smile she got in return was all the answer she needed, but Shepard spoke anyway. "Yeah! You
guys are fast. Thanks! They didn't have time to do any damage.”

The stairs doubled back on themselves and while the team soon found themselves headed back in the right direction, the new catwalk was even more exposed than anywhere else they'd been on the ship yet. Liara shook as the wind unexpectedly caught her as she was coming off the stairs and she inadvertently glanced off the side of the stairwell at the exact same time. With a groan, she moved to the inside edge of the walkway. "Ok. Looking down was clearly a mistake."

With a grin, Shepard reiterated the question Liara had asked her mere moments before. "Liara? Are you all right?"

Liara chuckled at the irony, but answered truthfully. "Yes, I'll be fine. The wind caught me right as I looked over the side and it felt like I was going over. Logically, of course, I knew I wasn't... my mag-boots are working just fine, but that didn't change my mind's perception of events and it made my stomach do somewhat of an unsettling flip."

Shepard laughed and smiled to take away any sting her next question may otherwise cause. "Are you ever not an analytical scientist?" The only response she got was a slightly nervous smile from her bondmate.

Now on the lower level, the team pressed forward and quickly ran into their next group of Broker troops. There were only two live troops and a mech, all of which were quickly dispatched before the team moved up a ramp on the other side and found an unsecured door. They stepped inside to another world. Liara practically stopped in her tracks, and probably would have had Grunt not bumped into her and shoved her inside. They were in the engine compartment and it was obvious the power required to run the ship was immense. Liara's admiration was evident in her tone of voice as she spoke, "This ship is incredible! It must have taken decades to build in secret!"

Jack snorted. "Yeah. And I'm thinking I'm glad I wasn't one of the contractors."

Liara replied quickly, "Yes. I think we can guess what happened to them once the ship was completed."

The corridor took them through the heart of the power systems and Liara's head was on a swivel as she tried to take it all in. "Navigating this storm must be brutal. If the engines went down, even for a moment... well, at least the Shadow Broker would go down with us."

Shepard glanced back at the enraptured Asari. "Let's not find out, shall we?"

Liara's attention snapped back to the task at hand as she issued a one word response. "Agreed."

They crossed a final bridge and went through one more doorway, finding themselves back outside. After talking about the engines failing, Shepard started to hope the hatch into the Broker's lair was close.

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Kasumi's dry humor lightened the mood of the whole group, especially after the gunship comment, and they moved speedily forward. They passed several rooms with computer terminals, which Mordin really wanted to stop at to collect data. Zaeed just growled at him. "Objective first. Play after the Broker's dead."

Mordin, in his very analytical manner agreed without question. "You are correct. Once Broker is gone, will have all the time we want to look. Thank you."
Kasumi had agreed with Mordin. All the high tech equipment laying around just called to her, begging to be picked up and slipped into one of her pockets. She was sure something would end up there before the end of the mission.

They reached a portion of the passage that seemed to split off, and while there was a locked door, there was also a large observation window. As they approached, Miranda was unexpectedly charged by a Broker Vanguard. Fortunately Miranda had full shields, so the charge didn't do anything more than stun her as she was bounced off the wall and out of position in their formation. It also put the Vanguard in full view of the other three members of the team, who hastily opened fire with everything they had. Under such concentrated fire, she went down with little resistance. A combat drone showed up, and Mordin quickly took that down while Kas cloaked and located and dispatched the engineer driving it. The locked door opened, saving them the trouble of having to hack it, as one additional guard joined the battle. Zaeed quickly ended the guard's tenure on the Broker ship and stepped into what seemed to be a small anteroom. As soon as Miranda walked in, she was on the comms. "Shepard. Don't bother going to the cell block. We've got Feron...he's in an interrogation room. Status unknown, I'll update you when we get more info."

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A series of ramps took them once more to the crest of the ship where it soon became evident the Broker knew where they were. The team faced the largest force yet, including some commando trained Asari and Salarian engineers. Fortunately, there were also a number of capacitors that helped even the odds. Shepard quickly realized they needed to work their way back across to the port side of the ship, and she hoped that no troopers showed up while they were crossing through the capacitor field. They got across the top and worked their way down one level on the other side before running into more resistance, but it was only two troopers and it hardly even slowed them down. As they hit the second sub-level they were accosted by a couple of mechs, but again, nothing serious. The worst part about it was the sloping deck under their feet. They no longer had level terrain and movement was more difficult... and slower. Luckily, it didn't last long and they found themselves climbing once more to the crest of the ship.

On the upper level, they ran into entrenched forces lying in wait. The group contained regular troops with heavy weapons, led by an Asari commando. Shepard immediately called on her biotics to take out the leader, but doing so left her exposed to rocket fire. Next thing she knew, Liara yelled and Shepard felt herself being slammed down on the deck. The rocket had broken the hold of her mag-boots and the only thing that kept her on the ship was Liara's quick reflexes. Liara grabbed her with her biotics and slammed her down out of the windstorm so her mag-boots could reengage. The hard impact with the deck barked every ounce of air out of her lungs and stunned her solar plexus, so she stayed there, wheezing, trying to catch her breath while her extremely angry bondmate staggered toward her.

Grunt saw what happened and charged the rocket trooper while screaming the commander's name, and Jack simply laughed and yelled, "Nice grab, T'Soni!"

Liara quickly knelt at the commander's side and all her anger evaporated when she realized she wasn't having a panic attack... The incredible tightness in her chest was because Shepard was having difficulty breathing and the effects were carrying through their link. Her mind flashed back in time and Liara checked the chest plate on Shepard's armor to make sure it hadn't been dented by the rocket, but the armor was fine. Liara was stymied, so was preparing to run a physical scan just as Shepard's breathing started to ease. Liara also managed to get enough breath in her lungs to finally speak. "Goddess, Shepard! Are you alright?" It was the third time that question had been asked on this mission, but this time Liara was not answered with a smile.
Shepard gripped her hand tightly and as she was still trying to catch her breath, she answered within the link. *{Between the rocket and one hell of a slam, my diaphragm isn't working quite like it should...give me a couple minutes and I should be fine....}* Shepard paused while she concentrated on taking a couple deep breaths and gave Liara's hand a bit of an extra squeeze. Liara's guilt at how much force she had inadvertently used in her urgent grab instantly dissolved with Shepard's next statement. *{Shit, Liara. I would have been a goner... Thank you.}* 

Even though they were in full suits and couldn't really touch their foreheads together, Liara leaned close and did the best approximation she could as she whispered back. *{Not on my watch, Shepard. Never again on my watch.}* 

The entryway into the interrogation room was locked, but Kasumi created the bypass within seconds. "You'd think the Broker would have better security."

Mordin chattered away. "Secondary interior level encryption. Only agents supposed to be here, not us. Shouldn't need more, so why waste resources?"

Once the door was open, Miranda checked out Feron's predicament. He was in some sort of odd chair, the purpose of which was unknown. She told Zaeed and Kasumi to make sure they were uninterrupted, and called Mordin to her for assistance. She then spoke softly to the Drell. "Feron, we're here with Dr Liara T'Soni. We're getting you out of here."

As she tried to access the terminal that controlled the chair, Feron screamed as electricity coursed through his body. The Broker's voice echoed over the ship-wide. "I want all teams to outpost C."

Mordin moved quickly into the confinement area to examine the chair while Miranda apologized profusely. Mordin stood up quickly and gave his evaluation. "The chair is plugged into the main systems. Impossible to bypass without terminating power to Broker operations. Anti-tamper devices preclude his removal from the chair without said loss of power. Interesting puzzle."

Miranda frowned. "Can you not identify how to cut the power?"

As Mordin prepared to answer to the negative, a weak voice spoke from the chair. "It won't be easy. You'll have to get to central operations."

Miranda offered an encouraging smirk. "That may be easier than you realize. Liara is already on her way there...part of a team of four. There's also an additional team other than us with four more. Even if we stay here with you, they'll still hit central ops with eight incredibly talented, well armed and armored, very motivated people."

Miranda looked to Mordin. "I'll send Kasumi in to help you. Zaeed and I will make sure no one else comes in, but I want you to figure that chair out. The minute power drops; I want him out of that contraption."

Mordin offered a quick nod. "Kasumi should be excellent assistance in this. We'll get it done."

Mordin was impressed, and he explained the set up to Kasumi as soon as she came in. "The cage surrounding the chair is a neural grounding rod. The surrounding medical equipment keeps him alive to prolong the torture."

Kasumi was already nodding. "I see that...and the anti-tamper triggers will cut the medical devices
off while opening the power flow to kill him within seconds, so we need to cut the power."

Mordin continued the explanation. "Exactly. Power control is in central operations. Will have to be done by Shepard's team. We figure out fastest way out of the chair once power drops. No idea of lag time for emergency power to kick on. Probably less than one minute. My guess... only fifteen seconds. When it happens, we must be ready and we must be quick."

Kasumi smiled. "Well then, we'd better get to it. I do love a challenge."

As soon as Shepard could breathe again, they got back on the move and quickly found themselves with another roadblock. Once again, they found and operated a switch and the path was clear for them to move onward. They emerged onto an upper deck crawling with Broker forces and riddled with capacitors. Shepard biotically charged the first trooper and riddled the second with her SMG, then ducked behind cover and swapped to her shotgun. A commando quickly dived into the fray, as well as a Salarian engineer and another rocket trooper, this one with guided rockets. That was a game changer, because it forced the team to dive behind cover...one couldn't simply dodge those damn things, seeing as they followed movement. Shepard waited, and as soon as the next rocket launched, so did Shepard. A crash and blast maneuver later, and the rocket troop was rocketed into the clouds. The charge also put Shepard into a position where she could see the whole Broker force currently opposing them. There was a second Asari and three more troopers, and by the time the team had taken them down, two more troopers had joined the fray, only to join their friends in the afterlife. The timing of Shepard's last charge was perfect, putting her right next to another activator switch just as Liara asked if anyone could see it. Shepard pulled and rotated the switch as she answered, "I'm on it!"

Gears turned and yet one more obstacle was removed from their path, revealing a long catwalk before them. Liara experience a slight case of déjà vu, and commented, "Not even a guardrail this time. The Broker's forces must just love patrolling the hull of this ship!"

Shepard laughed. "Hey! You can't beat the view though! It's awesome!"

Once they crossed the chasm, Liara exclaimed, "There! That hatch leads directly to the Broker's communications room!" Liara pulled out a special device and attached it over the lock mechanism. "This is the bypass shunt program I told you about. Only thing I don't know is how long it will take...it all depends on the complexity of the security coding."

Shepard grimaced. "I hope it doesn't take too long. I have a feeling we're in for some company."

It was merely seconds before Jack called out. "Damn, Shepard. How come you always have to be so fucking right all the time?"

Once the bypass shunt started working on cracking the door lock, the Broker's forces showed up in waves. The first group consisted of more Asari, yet still more rocket troops, a couple of Salarian engineers with combat drones and a handful of standard troops. As they cleaned up the first wave, Liara shouted out, "I'm sure it won't be much longer!"

Shepard shook her head. "Remember the old days on the SR-1, when we could just slap omni-gel on everything?"

Even Jack had to laugh at that one. "Oh, that shit was awesome! Used to get you anywhere... that security upgrade made a lot of people unhappy."
Liara grimaced, "Yes, it did. But mostly just the criminals!"

All joking ceased when the second wave rolled in on them, full of mostly heavily armored regular troopers and rocket drones. Shepard was suddenly wishing she had someone on her team with *Overload*. It would have made taking out all the drones *so* much easier. Instead, the team had to battle their way through them like normal folk, other than the fact they had three talented biotics and a walking tank. Fortuitously, it didn't prove horribly difficult. While they waited for the third wave, Shepard groaned when Liara commented, "Their attacks are disorganized. They'd be more effective if they all attacked at once."

Shepard retorted with zero delay, "Liara! Please don't give them any tactical advice... especially if it's good advice! They don't need to be any more effective than they are. Thank you very much!"

Grunt growled, "I don't care. Bring 'em on... I'm ready for MORE!"

Shepard heard a chiming tone and took a quick glance at the shunt and called out, "Just completed the fourth of five stages! It's getting there!"

Liara responded, "I hope it's quick... the next wave looks like a big one!"

As she finished speaking, it felt like the remainder of the Broker's forces converged on their position. There were Asari, mechs, foot soldiers and Salarian engineers... and just when it seemed it couldn't get much worse, another flight of rocket drones rolled in. Just as it seemed they were going to get overwhelmed, an alarm started ringing. Shepard yelled out, "What the hell is that?"

Liara shouted, "That's the shunt! The hatch is open!"

Shepard thanked the Gods as she shouted, "Alright! Everybody in!"

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Garrus and his team heard the Broker's announcement mere seconds before the agents blocking their progress seemed to vanish into thin air. He pulled up the floor plan Liara had provided and located outpost C, assuming that was where the action was going to be. Within seconds, they were hot on the trail of the enemy they had just been fighting.

Miranda and Zaeed were horribly outnumbered, but fortunately fighting from a decent defensive position. They couldn't have been happier when they heard one of the Broker agents call out, "Shit! They're behind us too!"

The individual teams had done a lot of whittling and the Broker's forces were shaken by the fact that such a relatively small team had penetrated so deeply into the base. The arrival of Garrus' team turned the tide with their overwhelming force; with four biotics and two extremely experienced soldiers, the Broker's army quickly broke. Still, none of them dared disobey the Broker's 'no matter the cost' proclamation and they died to the last man, every single one refusing to surrender.

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Shepard's team rolled through the hatch and Liara closed and scrambled the lock so the Broker troops couldn't follow them in. They moved down a stretch of hallway to a blind corner. They approached slowly, and Shepard peeked around the corner expecting to see a wall of troopers. Only a short set of stairs and a single guard stood in the way. Shepard climbed the steps with Liara beside her, maintaining a barrier in front of them. Shepard called out, "You don't need to die for this. We're going in that room, one way or another... So, you can live... or not."
Their answer was a flash-bang, and as soon as it left the guard's hand, Shepard biotically charged and finished him off with a burst from her weapon. When the rest of the team showed up, she opened the door... which only led to another hallway. It was shorter than most of the rest they had been in and clean, with no barriers nor bulkhead supports to interrupt the smooth walls. It looked like a hallway you'd see in an office building, not onboard ship. As they approached the next door, Shepard looked around at her team as Jack spoke. "This room's different, Shepard. There's a monitoring camera and a digital display in case they actually want to talk to you...which apparently they don't. But whoever's in there can see us, that's for sure."

Shepard looked at her bondmate. "Liara. Barrier. Let's see what's behind door number one."

As the barrier came up, Shepard hit the panel and the door opened. They walked in and Liara let the barrier drop, completely surprised. There was only a single life form in the entire area of central operations. One ... very ... large ... creature. For a long moment, no one spoke and the Shadow Broker leaned forward on his desk and interlaced his fingers, surveying the four beings in front of him. He finally spoke. "Here for the Drell? Reckless, even for you, Commander."

Shepard growled, "The bombing on Illium wasn't exactly subtle."

The Broker's voice showed little emotion. "Extreme, but necessary."

Liara sneered, "No it wasn't! Neither was caging Feron for two years!"

"Dr T'Soni. All of this is your fault. Your interference caused all this." The Broker was extremely hard to read, primarily because Shepard had never seen one of whatever race he was. "Feron betrayed me when he handed you Shepard's body. The Drell is simply paying the price."

Shepard raised her SMG and pointed it at the Broker. "What do you expect when you work for the Collectors? Someone was bound to come after you... and I certainly have more reason than most."

"Yes, the Collectors. It is a mutually beneficial partnership. Your arrival is convenient. The Collector's offer still stands. They have also expressed interest in Okeer's legacy... And then there is the matter of Cerberus' exorbitant bounty for Subject Zero. You've selected the perfect team to accompany you, Doctor. I couldn't ask for a better payoff. But, enough talk. My operations are too crucial to be compromised by a traitor."

Liara exuded confidence. "You're quite confident for someone with nowhere left to hide."

The Broker turned to Liara. "It's pointless to challenge me, Asari. I know your every secret, while you fumble in the dark."

Liara's eyes narrowed only slightly as she continued. "Is that right? Then why say Jack has a bounty on her? It's not a bounty... it was a finder's fee. They wanted Jack to work for them... and she is, so their offer is no longer valid. Who do you think is helping me take you down?" The Broker cocked his head ever so slightly before catching himself and straightening his posture. Liara had him a bit off balance with that statement. Shepard could tell he didn't like surprises.

Liara pressed onward. "You're a Yahg. A pre-spaceflight species quarantined to their homeworld for massacring the Council's first contact teams." Shepard's ears perked up as Liara continued. "This base is older than your planet's discovery, which means you killed the previous Shadow Broker sixty years ago, and then took over."

The Yahg's little ear flaps started twitching and Shepard could see his respiration rate rising. Liara was gaining traction and starting to irritate the Broker. That's my girl! Get him, Liara!
Liara heard Shepard, or at least got a burst of the pride she felt for her bondmate, through the meld, because a light smile formed as she continued on. "I'm guessing you were taken from your world by a trophy hunter who wanted a slave ... or a pet." The smile turned to a smirk as she finished. "How am I doing?"

With that, the Yahg stood and the team backed off. The Broker was positively huge, but Shepard almost laughed when a random though flitted across her consciousness. He's not as big as a thresher maw. Suddenly the Broker bellowed and swiped a huge paw at his desk, breaking it apart and sending pieces tumbling. Shepard grabbed Liara and lunged off to the side with her, dodging the majority of the flying debris. A quick glance around showed Grunt survived just fine, but Jack, without armor, hadn't fared so well, so only three of them were left to fight. The Yahg roared one last time and produced a weapon off a hardpoint on his back. His body was so massive no one even realized he was armed because no one could see the gun. It didn't really matter, because he faced the concentrated fire of three excellent warriors. The room wasn't really very spacious, but had several pillars and benches, providing more than adequate cover for the three of them; it was easy to flank him.

The weapons fire obviously did its work, but instead of falling, the Yahg generated some kind of full body barrier that protected him while he regenerated. Liara called out, "It's kinetically sensitive! Energy and high-speed projectiles are bouncing off!"

Shepard looked quickly to the Krogan, "Grunt! We do this the hard way!" Shepard ran at the Yahg and drew a Karambit blade seemingly out of nowhere, slashing it across a monstrous thigh, the barrier offering no protection to the Yahg.

Grunt about cried with joy as he yelled "Battlemaster! Wait for me!" and charged into the fight. As soon as Grunt threw his first punch, the Yahg dropped the barrier and instead now held some type of energy shield in his hand. He swung it hard and batted both Shepard and Grunt away like flies with a single crushing swing. The battle began anew; Liara drew his fire while Grunt and Shepard regained their feet and got back into the fight. Once again the concentrated weapons fire took its toll and the Yahg formed his regenerative barrier. This time there was no hesitation on Grunt's part and both he and Shepard dived into melee combat. Again, the Broker was forced to drop the barrier and raise his shield. Grunt ran in and leaned against the shield, getting the Yahg into a pushing contest.

Shepard rolled out and was attempting a flanking maneuver when the Broker abruptly sidestepped and Grunt stumbled past. The Broker spun amazingly fast for his bulk and smashed Grunt across the back with the energy shield, putting the young Krogan down for the count. Liara grabbed at Shepard as she tried to run by. "If you can get him to bring up that shield again, I've got an idea..."

Shepard nodded an acknowledgement and followed Liara's eyes to what looked like a white molten pool suspended behind glass in the ceiling. The next segment of battle was a little longer and a bit tougher, missing Grunt's addition firepower and the extra angle of attack, now able to only attack from two fronts instead of three. Never the less, they wore the Broker down enough where he raised his barrier and Shepard quickly attacked, once again forcing him to change to his shield. Knowing Liara's intent, Shepard danced with the Yahg and soon lured him to center stage. Seeing Liara's arms rise, filled with biotic power, Shepard dived off to the side and hoped to get far enough away to escape whatever it was her bondmate was planning.

Liara grabbed the glass of the plasma containment vat with her biotics and pulled, shattering the glass and raining raw plasma down onto the huge Yahg. The resultant explosion disintegrated the Yahg and blasted Shepard backward through the air a good distance, once again landing flat on her back and barking air out of her lungs for the second time since arriving on the Broker ship. As she lay there, stunned by what had just happened, Liara ran over and once more questioned, "Goddess!
Shepard! Are you all right?" Due to the explosion and Liara's concern for her bondmate, they failed to notice when the lights flickered and all the terminals in central operations shut down.

Shepard's landing was as natural a fall as could be expected after being blown off your feet from a plasma explosion, and it lacked the force of one of Liara's biotic slams, for sure. So, Shepard actually had enough air left in her lungs to let out what was a pitifully weak laugh, but a laugh none the less. "I think I'm getting tired of that question." She looked up at Liara, who was also breathing heavily after the fight, and smiled, letting her bondmate know she was just fine. Liara gave her a distracted smile in return and gave her a hand up.

Liara stepped back and looked around, seemingly bewildered and at a loss for what to do next. Shepard flashed her another smile and turned to help Grunt, who was starting to move and grumble about missing the end of the fight. They then went to the pile of desk fragments and started digging Jack out, who immediately started threatening to do them bodily harm if any of them said a word about her spending the entire fight buried in a pile of rubble. While they were busy with that, the terminals rebooted on emergency power and messages started squawking.

"Shadow Broker, this is Operative Murat. We had a momentary connection failure. Can you confirm status?"

"Operative Shora requesting update. Are we still online?"

Liara walked slowly to the counter, looking at the vast array of monitors as the voices continued.

"Shadow Broker, I've lost our feed. We are online and awaiting instructions."

Liara's eyes moved quickly over all the feeds, the number of incoming requests overwhelming, and confusion threatening to reign. She closed her eyes and shut it all out, focusing her thoughts. When her eyes reopened, she was back in control, her mind settled. She strode purposefully to the control panel, studied it quickly, flipped a couple of switches and pressed the voice activator button. "This is the Shadow Broker. The situation is under control. We experienced a minor power fluctuation while upgrading hardware. It disrupted communications momentarily. However, we are now back online. Resume standard procedures. I want a status report on all operations within the next solar day. Shadow Broker, out."

When all the plasma drained from the storage tank, it caused a power surge and then a very short blackout before the backup systems came online. Mordin and Kasumi were standing by, and the minute the lights started to flicker they got ready. The lights went out and they moved; by the time the lights came back up, they had Feron free of the chair and stretched out flat on the floor, Mordin and Miranda checking him over thoroughly. Feron seemed physically ok; the medical equipment connected to the chair insured he would have had a long life of torture in front of him, had Dr T'Soni and the Normandy crew not intervened. Psychological wellness was not a question any of them were quite yet prepared to answer.

When Liara answered the multiple hails over the Shadow Broker network, she had utilized a 'Broadcast All' function that she didn't totally understand, and it included the ship-wide broadcast channel, so Feron heard the announcement. Much to the chagrin of Mordin and Miranda, Feron jumped up and took off running down the hallway, grabbing a weapon from one of the dead mercs along the way. Both Mordin and Miranda were in pursuit, knowing exactly what he was thinking. Listening to the broadcast voice, they feared he might be right.
Just as Liara finished up the announcement, Feron busted into central operations, gun drawn. He slowed to a walk and looked at Liara with amazement as he approached. "Goddess of oceans...It's you. You... how?"

Having finished speaking, Liara pushed herself back from the control panel. "Well, everyone who's ever seen the Broker in person is dead, so..." She just faded out, her eyes glassy with exhaustion and threatening tears.

Feron finished it for her, "... so you're the new Shadow Broker."

All the activity had certainly gotten Shepard's attention, especially Feron's last statement. Her head snapped around and with a couple quick strides she was standing close enough to speak to her bondmate. "Liara! Are you sure about this? Though, I must admit it would be nice to have access to information I can trust... Broker."

Liara looked about ready to fall over as she spoke, but she got the words out. "I'm... not sure I'm ready for you to call me that. I'm not sure about any of this. But I had to do it. With the Shadow Broker's network, I can give you... I can..." Liara's voice faltered, her last words broken, then she stopped all together and glanced back over her shoulder, looking beseechingly at Shepard, who stepped up to her quickly. Everyone else in the room faded away, hurriedly finding something else that needed their attention.

As the threatened tears started to fall, Shepard wrapped her bondmate in her arms and held her tight. Liara mumbled into her neck, "It's over. It's finally over... for two years..."

Shepard softly caressed her lover's back and offered support, crooning in her ear gently, "It's all right, Liara. It's over, and I'm here. We're here... together."

Liara pulled back enough to press her lips tenderly to Shepard's before separating completely. "Goddess. I don't think I can believe it. All I wanted... Feron alive... You, back in my arms. I've gotten that and more... more than I ever dreamed. For now, we need to figure out our options. See what we have." She turned back to the control panel. "He had no safeguards, like he never anticipated anyone else ever being here. And it's all ours."

Shepard spoke from behind, looking over Liara's shoulder. "Blue. Be sure about this. You don't have to stay here... You can come with me... I'd like that."

Liara dropped her head, seemingly in defeat. "I have to stay here, Shepard. As much as I want to be with you... Goddess. We even talked about this! All I wanted was to be done with this so I could go with you. But I never expected this. We can't pass this up, Shepard, and we certainly can't let the Illusive Man have it. Think of all the information I'll be able to give you... The capabilities we'll be able to bring to bear against the Reapers! And I'm starting to realize we may have other... complications...we need to speak of."

Shepard gently pulled Liara's shoulder and turned her so they were face to face. "I know, Liara. It's too good to pass up, and I'm sure we'll need every resource you can wrangle up." She gently caressed Liara's face. "But it doesn't mean I have to like it."

Liara gained back a little bit of her smile. "Of course not, and you can come by whenever you get the chance. The Broker's door will always be open to you."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Shepard still laughed. "Yeah, but don't forget I've got a date tonight with Liara T'Soni...not the Broker. You're not getting out of it that easy."
Liara pulled Shepard back into her arms. "I should hope not, Commander."

"We're both exhausted, Liara. We need to sleep... then we can figure out with clear heads what the hell we're doing for the long term." Shepard kissed her gently and lowered her voice to a sultry whisper meant only for the Asari before her to hear. "Stripped naked... skin-on-skin... sleep and wake with you in my arms... Isn't that basically what you offered?"

Liara wanted to completely melt into the commander's embrace. "Goddess! Yes! But..." Liara forced herself to pull away. "But all of this? We can't just leave it!"

Feron interrupted. "No, we can't, but I've been an agent for years, and all I've done for the last two is sleep or be tortured in that damn chair. I'm not going to sleep any time soon. Go. I'll try to get things organized for you, and I can give you a quick summary in the morning when you come back."

"Feron, you sure? You should see our medical doctor before you do too much of anything." Shepard looked at him closely, scrutinizing, trying to determine if he was ready to do something like this.

"I'm sure, Shepard. If you insist, you can always send the doc to me, but Miranda and Mordin both looked me over fairly well, and they let me loose... Besides, if Liara will have me, I'd like to stay on here and help her. She shouldn't stay here alone... No one should."

Shepard looked at Liara, who was really too tired to care so she just shrugged. "Fine. Thank you, Feron. We'll see you in the morning." Shepard took Liara's hand and gave it a gentle tug. "Come on, Doctor. We've got a date."
Shepard and Liara returned to the Normandy and went by the med bay to pay Karin the requisite visit and to tell her about Feron. With the entire ground crew having gone on the mission, she'd actually had a pretty busy day with a multitude of minor injuries to treat. As a result, by the time the dynamic duo arrived she was tired and actually released them with very few words. "Eat, drink plenty of electrolytes, and sleep. I'll see you tomorrow." A quick hug of welcome for Liara and she shoved them out the door to get their much needed nourishment and rest.

They ate in the mess for a few reasons. First, they both needed a decent meal for a change; neither one had eaten real food in over thirty-six hours and since Shepard had arranged for Mess Sergeant Gardner to get decent supplies, he started putting out some pretty good meals. Second, the crew needed to see the commander back on board and in control. Because of the circumstances, Shepard had ordered a communications blackout that would remain in effect until the Normandy was back in Citadel space. Shepard wanted no signals going out that could be traced back to their current coordinates, right next to the Shadow Broker base; she didn't even want anyone figuring out what system they were in. Even Edi cooperated and temporarily suspended all communications to the Illusive Man, with the understanding she could keep all the regular logs and transmit everything once they reached the Crescent Nebula. Being completely out of touch with the outside world could be unsettling, so the commander made a point of walking around the ship and talking to a number of the crew so they could see it was mostly business as usual. Third, they knew the minute they got back to the loft there would be no time for food. The call of the bed would be too strong; they would shed their clothes, they would shower and then they would sleep, which was exactly what happened when the time came.

As was typical, Shepard awoke first but she felt no driving need to get up right away. A quick glance at her chrono revealed eight hours had passed; not the twelve Liara had joked about, but a decent night's sleep none the less. Liara was still resting peacefully and Shepard knew if she moved, the Asari would know and be right behind her. They were too closely linked now for any other result to be expected. As it was, it seemed Liara somehow sensed she was awake and contemplating how to sneak out... Shepard felt the Asari's grip around her waist tighten as Liara snuggled in closer. As was also typical, it was hard for Shepard to just be still without something to keep her mind entertained, so she started to sing quietly as she tenderly stroked the crests of the beautiful naked being lying beside her. The song that came to mind was 'Then.'

I remember, trying not to stare the night that I first met you.
You had me mesmerized.

And three weeks later, in the front porch light, taking 45 minutes to kiss goodnight.

I hadn't told you yet, I thought I loved you then.

Now you're my whole life.

Now you're my whole world.

I just can't believe the way I feel about you, girl.

Like a river meets the sea stronger than it's ever been.

We've come so far since that day, and I thought I loved you then.

She fell off into silence, thinking of the next verse. She would never be able to take Liara back to where they first met; a major volcanic eruption had a way of guaranteeing that. The verse after that was not yet within the realm of possibility... there was a lot that needed to happen between now and when they could contemplate having children, but it was still a dream. A hope of a future with Liara that Shepard really wanted to come to pass. Thinking of everything that they had to do to reach that eventuality made Shepard grow restless and she leaned over to kiss Liara on the forehead only to see a pair of radiant blue eyes studying her, penetrating to her very essence. Shepard wondered how long Liara had been awake and how much of her wandering thoughts she had heard through their link.

Shepard's lips redirected to a new target, and what was originally intended to be a chaste peck on the forehead turned into much, much more. It seemed her bondmate had heard... enough. Liara moved to meet her, wrapped their legs together and slid atop Samantha as she kissed down her neck to the point where she could feel Shepard's pulse pounding, just above her collar bone. With an urgent cry born of desire, she returned to savor luscious lips until lungs screamed for air. Darkening greens met radiant blues turned obsidian and the roaring tide met flames of passion that burned long and bright.

One arm pushed Liara's upper body up to hover over Samantha while their hips pushed together in want. Her free hand slid down her lover's quickly contracting abs into the shrinking space between their bodies until her fingertips found no more room to progress. Sam uttered a strangled sound and her hands moved from the blue breasts above her to Liara's hips and pushed up, just enough for blue fingers to reach their final destination. Sam's eyes closed and her head rocked back into her pillow, her tongue peeking out to wet her lips before she sucked in and bit her lower lip as her body shuddered with desire and wetness poured forth. Her lover's name growled out from deep in her throat as her hands slipped smoothly into the soft folds of her lover's lower back.

Liara cried out in pleasure as her back arched into Samantha's touch and her hips rocked into the back of her own hand, wedged between them. The heel of Liara's hand pressed hard to Shepard's clit as slim fingers penetrated deep, causing her lover to release her own cry of delight as her hips started rocking with the thrusts. Liara's eyes went black and she pushed an image through the meld of them together on the estate on Thessia. Sam immediately recognized it was not a memory, but a promise for the future as Liara said one word. {Yes.}

Boundaries blurred and shared ecstasy carried their joined soul to unimaginable heights. In every sense of being, they were one. They remained together... exploring, experimenting and experiencing as one until the mental exhaustion made it impossible to maintain the meld any longer and the one reluctantly became two again. After the souls divided, the two bodies remained entangled within the sheets, having no will to separate, still reveling in the physical solace of touch. {By the Gods, Liara. That was... that just WAS. I don't think a satisfactory word exists.}
Liara's sweet laughter reverberated through their seemingly now permanent link, no meld required for simple communication. Her face was buried in Sam's neck, breathing in leather and musk, and her hand rested atop Sam's breasts, relishing in the steady thrum of the heart within, still surging from exertion. *I believe the word you are looking for, my love, is one we both just recently learned... Inanna.* Liara pulled her head back just enough so she could take in the enthralling site of her bondmate.

If one could think sheepishly, Shepard did so with the tone of her response. *Oh! Yeah, you're probably right! L... uhm... It's still a bit new for the human half over here, who isn't even supposed to be able to do it.* She couldn't help but laugh with her bondmate, feeling Liara's rumbling chest like it was her own. Shepard opened her eyes to a view she would never get tired of and never forget. Liara was radiant; her eyes sparkled with joy and her smile promised a thousand lifetimes of happiness. The expression on Liara's face in that moment was the one Shepard would recall in her darkest hours. When she thought of Liara to pull her through a tough spot or to go that extra mile... that was the face she would see.

Unfortunately, the look didn't last, as the demands of the day slipped in like a thief and stole their temporary reprieve. Too soon, they found themselves up and dressed, and headed back to the Shadow Broker ship. They found Garrus there with one of the Normandy engineering crews, giving the ship a good once over. He told them they had first cleaned up the debris in Central Operations and were now working through the ship and collecting all the corpses. It was a gruesome job... they were stripping all the armor, weapons and omnitools and ejecting the bodies into the atmosphere on the sunward side of Hagalaz. There would be no remains; no evidence a large portion of the Broker army had been wiped out and replaced with a new crew. Once done with that task, they would start on repairing all the battle damage.

Feron had to meet them at the door of Central Operations and let them in, having already instituted more protections than the previous Shadow Broker ever did. He immediately passed them the new entry codes he had programmed in overnight and wasted no time getting started on his summary briefing. "If you'll please follow me, I'll give you the quick tour. There are a number of active terminals, each providing a particular set of data."

As soon as the door closed behind them, they were assaulted by a drone. Feron looked like he wanted to shoot it. *That is the old broker's VI. It's been helpful, introducing me to the various capabilities of the network, but it greets every person coming into the room as the Shadow Broker. We'll need to load some recognition software and reprogram it.*

Feron started to work around the room counterclockwise. "This terminal imports everything the software identifies as 'investment opportunities,' though I find them unfiltered. Some really bad investment risks pop up, so we'll have to be careful until we can fine tune the search engine." As he moved to the next terminal he kept explaining. "Of course it's up to you, Liara, to set our final operating parameters, but I'm pretty sure your goals will not match those of the previous broker, so some adjustments are to be expected."

Liara nodded in agreement. "Yes. Obviously, we'll readjust priorities, first to the Collectors and second to the Reapers. Once the Collectors are dealt with..." She cast a glance accompanied by a quick smile to Shepard as she continued, "...we'll adjust those priorities again."

Feron nodded once, quickly. "As you wish, Shadow Broker."

Liara stopped dead in her tracks. "Feron. Please don't call me that. I know you mean no offense, but I just... His reputation was so horrible, I can't assume that mantle. Please, just stick with Liara. As far as anyone else knows, we are just his agents, not the actual Broker. If you feel compelled to use
some formality, then Dr T'Soni will do nicely as well."

Feron nodded again. "Certainly, Liara. I can... understand... the sentiment."

He fell silent until they reached the next terminal, which turned out to be survey information on various precious elements. Since they were needed to complete some of the upgrades the team had located, Shepard was very interested and promptly purchased all the rights currently listed as available. Feron blinked in surprise as Shepard spent credits like candy and Liara chuckled. "Don't worry, Feron. She's spending Illusive Man money."

From the look on his face, she realized Feron's emotion shifted from surprise to loathing. Liara could certainly understand that sentiment, even if only from the way they had been manipulated during the recovery of Shepard's body in order to assure Human dominance. Though there were plenty of others out there, they needed no other reason to hate Cerberus. They moved on quickly, and the next terminal also greatly interested Shepard. It provided for deliveries of the same precious elements as those listed on the survey terminal. Definitely worth stopping at. The next station was a research terminal that provided information on additional upgrades of all kinds as well as some prototype research for things not yet on the open market. She placed a call to Jacob and asked him to come over to take a look; Miranda had assigned him the job of overseeing all the upgrades for the Normandy, so this was definitely his sandbox to play in.

They moved onto the next station, and Shepard and Liara both were speechless. The terminal contained dossiers in unimaginable detail. Any personal data that entered the system was cataloged and sorted into a file that included everything from public biographies to restricted medical records and supposedly personal correspondence. It gave Shepard an excellent understanding of just how much information TIM had held back from her when they provided the dossiers for her crew selections. Just for curiosity sake, Shepard looked up Miranda Lawson and almost immediately stumbled upon something she wished she hadn't. It seemed to her the fact that Miranda was unable to bear children because of her extensive genetic modifications was something nobody had the right to know unless Miranda wanted them too. Shepard blushed in embarrassment, and glanced at Liara. "I think it'd be a good idea to limit access to this terminal strictly to key personnel." Liara said nothing, just nodded in agreement behind her own blush.

Feron cleared his throat, "Yes. Well. That completes the main area. If you'll come with me to the back room, there's one more station that may very much be worth your time."

When they went through a door in the center of the rear wall, it opened to a large seating area that looked like part of a recreation or informal meeting room. Off to the side, however, was a video capture terminal that had a number of surveillance videos cued for review. Feron quickly flipped through and found the one in particular he was looking for. "It's personal and I thought you'd want to see this one... so I will leave you to it. But before I go back to work..." Feron looked at the two of them together and couldn't help but whisper his next words. "I'm still amazed that you risked what you did to come for me. I'll never forget what either of you did. I am forever in your debt. Thank you."

Shepard and Liara glanced at one another and Shepard nodded. Liara looked at Feron, her eyes glistening with emotion. "We haven't forgotten why you were here to begin with, Feron. It was the least we could do to repay you for helping me get our future back." Liara swallowed hard and grasped Shepard's hand before pressing on. "We also talked this morning about what role you'll play in that future." Feron focused his full attention on the couple as Liara continued. "I still have your ship. We dry-docked it at my estate on Thessia, along with the one we swiped from Tazzik...and I have the Aletheia. We would like to bring them all here and turn them into mobile Broker platforms to distribute the wealth, so to speak." At Feron's surprised look, she explained. "The Broker carries
too much power to be vested in a single entity. I would like you to be part of a triad. We'll use the ship here for now, eventually transferring the functions to me on the Aletheia, you on your ship, and a third party we'll need to select. A distributive network is more secure, both in its mobility and its redundancy. Once we establish the mobile platforms and test their integration to make sure we lose no capabilities, we'll destroy this base."

Feron's face first reflected shock, but he wasn't stupid and quickly realized the benefits. Shepard chimed in and added their final argument. "The worst part about this ship is it's not space worthy, which means we can't move it to hide it somewhere else... and the rest of Cerberus, including the Illusive Man, will soon know where it is."

Feron's eyes lit up. "And you can't let that man get his hands on the Shadow Broker network! Now I fully understand your reasoning and I can't fault it, but I don't know that I'm ready to take on such responsibility full time."

Liara smiled. "That's the whole point. No one should. So, we make it a true triad and any major shifts in policy will require a consensus. It will provide a cross-check and keep us all honest. Relatively speaking, anyway. And any time one of us is unsure about a move, we have two others to ask for advice. I imagine that will happen frequently, at least at the beginning. None of us ever need make a decision in a vacuum."

Feron actually smiled. "That's... an excellent idea, Liara. Under those conditions, I would agree to help from the Rakhana. I can't believe I'm getting my ship back! Thank you. I'll leave you to the video. We'll talk later, Liara."

As Feron walked off, Liara and Shepard looked at the terminal and played the mysterious video. It wasn't very long, but Feron was right...it was definitely personal. Shepard and Liara both recognized Matriarch Aethyta from the Eternity bar on Illium... and recognized the photo she was staring at longingly. As she hypothesized and drew her initial conclusions, Liara was only able to mutter one word. "Goddess!"

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After Shepard extracted a promise from Liara to be back on the Normandy for dinner at 6 PM, she rounded up Feron and took one of the Broker shuttles back to the ship. Feron could use it to return on his own after he paid a visit to Dr Chakwas. In the meantime, Shepard sat in the open mess and drafted a number of two-line messages to go out on her secure link, outlining the plans she and Liara had put together that morning. Riana would pass any open brokerage business to Barla Von on the Citadel and then close up the Illium office, justified by Liara's 'disappearance' after the attack. She would then pack some of Liara's personal effects, including only what Liara would need for a month-long business trip...a dangerous month-long business trip. Once Riana was done, the Illium commandos would secure the apartment and take the Aletheia to a set of coordinates provided by Shepard, all to be accomplished immediately. Shepard planned to meet them at the Ismar Frontier relay, after they completed Zaeed's mission against the Blue Suns on Zorya. Shepard and Liara hated the deception, but led the commandos to believe Liara had been taken and they were rendezvousing with the Normandy to mount a rescue operation. It insured a credible back-story would be left behind on Illium without any of the commandos having to lie. Once they got to Hagalaz, Liara and Feron could handle the rest of the arrangements necessary to operationalize the three mobile Broker platforms. It would be expensive, but the Broker had the assets to do it. She then drafted a message for Arlyn and Niria, asking if they were ready and able to depart Thessia for their next adventure.

Crew occasionally interrupted with a question and Garrus checked in to let her know the cleanup was complete and the majority of the remaining repairs were minor maintenance issues they were
going to ignore. He focused the teams on the major bulkhead repair work, which they would complete by the next morning. All in all, the day passed quietly and quickly and Shepard collected her datapads and retreated to the loft in preparation of Liara's arrival. Mess Sergeant Gardner had prepared an Italian dinner and was ready to deliver two meals to the loft whenever Shepard called down for it, so it became a waiting game. Shepard was undecided on what she was going to wear, and finally opted to slip into her jeans and boots. She knew Liara liked it, and it wasn't like Liara had time to pack before they left, so all she had was her armor.

Liara, of course, was late, but not very. She got caught up sifting through data and before she knew it, the drone was following her around reminding her of her dinner date. She smiled when she realized Shepard must have put it on the schedule before she departed for the Normandy. She knows me too well... no. She just knows me. Since there was no need to change, Liara notified Feron she was leaving, probably for the night, and went directly to the shuttle bay. She walked into the loft and smiled as soon as she laid eyes on the commander. Shepard called down for their dinner, and then greeted her with a smile and a warm embrace. "How was your day?"

Liara sighed. "Tiring. And long. I feel guilty for being here, there's so much to do. So much archived data to go through. I want to figure out how to better use the info-drone to search the archives, but then I fear I'll miss something important that comes in off the new feeds." She shook her head. "I'm really not sure how the old Broker did it alone."

Shepard took her hand. "You're not alone, Liara. You have Feron for now, and as soon as I get the message to the commandos, you'll have them here within a couple of days. Hopefully Arlyna and Niria as well, not long after that." Shepard paused only momentarily to throw her best look of encouragement toward her bondmate. "So, did you find anything interesting today?"

Liara's eyes opened a bit wider for just an instant as her brain shifted gears and she started to pace, so Shepard knew she had something of importance on her mind. "As a matter of fact, I did. The Shadow Broker knew about the Reapers. I believe that's why he offered to help prove Saren's guilt to the Council. He was no different than the rest of us, just looking for a way to survive what's coming." She stopped and looked directly into Samantha's eyes. "Shepard. He knew about the beacons. He has data on the Protheans and textual summaries of your vision. He seemed to think there's more out there; that perhaps the Protheans had other plans. Back-ups to the scientists and their stasis pods... or vice-versa." Liara let out a big sigh and scrubbed her hand across her brow. "Or perhaps it was wishful thinking and he was just grasping at anything that offered some hope. There's just so much more information to go through!" She looked again to Shepard in exasperation.

Shepard stepped in and pulled her close. "It's ok, Liara. We'll figure it out. Collectors first, then the Reapers. We're unstoppable as a team. We'll get there. We have to, don't we?"

As Gardner rang at the door with dinner, Liara replied, "Yes. We don't have much choice, do we?" It was obvious her words were more an observation than a question.

After a quiet dinner, they relaxed on the couch, but Liara's mind was still ruminating on the business at hand. "So, Collectors first. What do you need from me?"

Shepard grimaced. "Li... I don't know how much you exactly know about our attack strategy, and I've been hesitant to tell you precisely what we're planning. But it's time. I can't put it off anymore, especially now with your new resources."

Shepard watched a flicker of alarm run through her bondmate's eyes as Liara asked her next question. "Shepard? If you're concerned about telling me, I'm worried about what you plan to do.
Just what are you thinking?"

Sighing, Shepard explained about the Collector homeworld...and where it was most likely located, and the plan to take the fight to them, through the Omega-4 relay.

Liara practically exploded off the couch. "WHAT? Are you insane? No one's ever... Oh, Goddess! Samantha!" Her face clouded immediately and she couldn't stop the tears from falling. "Shepard, you were dead! I can't... I just... No! Please..." Her voice was weak and pleading, her thoughts suddenly so fractured she couldn't manage to put a sentence together. She turned away in frustration and helplessness, taking several strides away from the commander and burying her face in her hands.

Shepard followed her and wrapped her arms around the trembling Asari. "Blue. You brought me back...and I know it was for much more than just fighting the Reapers. We've got something special and I want the whole package... marriage, old age and lots of little blue children. I know you heard my thoughts this morning and you must have sensed that I meant every bit of it. I have no intention of this being a suicide mission. We've lost enough time...I don't want to lose any more, for any reason. But we have to stop them... or we have no future."

Liara took a series of deep, shuddering breaths, and tried somewhat unsuccessfully to regain control. Her voice trembled as she spoke. "I know, my love, but it's easier said than done. I almost threw our future away once out of fear, but I can't help myself... it still frightens me, Shepard. The prospect of losing you again... There's no way... I won't survive a second time... Especially now. With what we have, what we are! Oh, Goddess...please!"

She dropped her hands from her face and turned around. Glistening blue eyes focused on intense greens. Her breath hitched as she continued, "You have to promise me... swear that you'll come back to me!" She clutched at Shepard desperately, her fists wadding up the front of her bondmate's shirt. Tears ran down her face again when she saw the dejected expression the request put on Samantha's face and she shook her head as she looked down at the floor. "Goddess. I know I can't ask you to promise me that. Forgive me."

Shepard's smile was strained as she gently wiped the tears from Liara's cheeks. "I onúin álainn. It's ok. I understand, so there is nothing to forgive. I told you this before...on Illium, but it's worth repeating." Samantha cupped her hands under Liara's chin and drew it up until their eyes met. "I love you, and as long as it is remotely within my power to do so, I'll always come back for you. I promise. After all, marriage to you and a chance to watch our children grow up? You bet it's worth every ounce of effort I can muster, plus some. Seeing your smile is worth everything to me. I love you, Siame, with my entire heart and soul."

Liara hugged Shepard close and closed her eyes, whispering, "Thank you, Samantha. It's as much as I can ask for." Her voice grew stronger as she continued. "And I have a promise in return. I will find everything there is in the Broker archives on the Collectors and the Omega-4 relay. If you're really going to go, I'm going to make sure you're prepared for it."

"Thank you, Blue. I know we'll find what we need. I won't go until we do. I promise."

"I'll hold you to that, Commander." They stood together in silence for a time, gaining strength from each other's embrace. Liara finally queried, "Shepard? You have said those words before, and I still don't know what they mean... what is ionúin álainn?"

Shepard planted a loving kiss on Liara's lips and pulled away. "It's Gaelic, not Earth standard. That's why your translator doesn't pick it up. It means 'beautiful beloved.' That is what you are to me." Smiling lightly, she waved her hand at the glasses sitting on the table. "Now. I've poured two perfect glasses of Pris Para. We mustn't let it go to waste."
Liara glanced shyly at her lover, "Samantha? There is something else I've been meaning to ask you, since our reunion on Illium." Shepard gave her a sideways glance, an eyebrow raised in question but she said nothing, waiting for Liara to continue. "You sing."

After a brief pause while expecting more to come, Shepard hummed, "Huh. I don't believe that's a question, my dear doctor."

Liara blushed and then responded. "You are correct. I'm sorry. It's just that all the time we spent together on the first Normandy, I never heard you sing. Not. Once. Yet, you have a beautiful voice. I'm just curious as to why I never heard it before then...and you sang again this morning."

Shepard saw the beautiful, innocent young archeologist come out, with the rapt expression of knowing she had a mystery to solve, and Shepard fell in love all over again. She immediately closed the gap and wrapped Liara in her arms. "Oh, my dearest Blue...so you were awake for that this morning. I thought maybe, after you hugged me and snuggled in, but I couldn't tell for sure exactly when you woke. And, that's still not truly a question, but I know what you're fishing for." Even so, instead of providing any kind of answer, Samantha arched her eyebrows in a playful challenge, and then briefly stood on her tiptoes to plant a kiss high on Liara's forehead. "I think I probably have a couple of secrets left yet, that even the Shadow Broker hasn't managed to dig out."

Liara smirked, "Apparently," then waited expectantly.

Shepard threw back her head and let out a joyous laugh, knowing the solemn mood had truly broken. "What? So now I'm supposed to stand here and rattle off some more, just to prove my point?" The expression of expectation on Liara's face was priceless, and Shepard couldn't resist. "Ok. Here's one you'll never believe. I actually can dance...just not that crap they call dancing in the clubs."

It was Liara's turn to laugh as she sputtered out, "Oh, now that I actually would like to see!"

Shepard raised her eyebrows in challenge. "So. You don't believe me. What will you give me if I prove you wrong?"

Liara hesitated, thinking the commander seemed quite sure of herself, the way she was speaking... but the commander? Dance? Liara shook her head and boldly stated, "If you prove me wrong, you may name your prize, Shepard." The commander's eyes lit up so brightly, Liara immediately regretted her brash announcement. She whispered, "By the Goddess. What did I just get myself into?"

Shepard walked over to her terminal and pulled up the music screen. Glancing over her shoulder at her bondmate, she gestured with her chin, "Center of the open floor, please, dear Shadow Broker."

Liara dutifully positioned herself where requested and waited.

Shepard typed something into the terminal and then turned to Liara one more time. "How are you at following?"

Liara laughed, albeit a bit nervously. "I am a Matriarch's daughter. I'm sure I can follow a sure hand anywhere it may lead, Commander."

"Oh, ho! So first you doubt... and then you assume I can provide a 'sure hand,' as you put it?" Shepard nodded. "Good. I'm about to test that." She hit the enter key and joined her bondmate, guiding Liara's right hand to her left shoulder, and then placing her own left hand on the Asari's hip. She held her right hand out to the side, expectantly. Liara tentatively placed her left hand on top of the waiting hand as the first notes of a beautiful instrumental version of Edelweiss began to play.
Shepard explained. "It's an old Earth tradition. The dance is called the waltz. I've selected a fairly slow one. Easy to learn by."

Liara's eyes grew wide with wonder as her image of Samantha Shepard was magically transformed. Shepard counted the three-step softly in Liara's ear until she got the hang of it, which Shepard noticed was very quick. Once she got the rhythm, the only time Liara faltered was when Samantha surprised her yet again, by starting to sing the words to the song in her rich alto voice while they danced. She quickly recovered, but looked at the commander with a new sense of awe. As the last notes faded away, Shepard leaned in and kissed her gently on the cheek. Liara's eyes floated closed as she breathily whispered, "Samantha. That was just... stunning. I don't have a word to describe it, or my surprise to go with it. It was beyond beautiful...as well as very unexpected."

Shepard stepped back and bowed to Liara, "A fitting tribute to my beyond beautiful bondmate."

"So, my dear commander. What prize shall you claim?" Liara's shy smile indicated she may have some idea what the commander was going to pick, but she was shocked by the reply.

"Oh no, my good doctor. Just because you were hasty with your pronouncement, doesn't mean I will be so with mine. I'm going to think on it for awhile. I'll let you know when I come up with something good." Shepard's face filled with a devilishly mischievous smile. "And trust me. It will be very good."

Liara was so amazed, she 'made' Samantha dance with her twice more to be sure she actually had the footwork down. Eventually, they actually sat down to relax and drink their Elasa. Their previous discussion still haunted the shadows of their minds and they took nothing for granted. The night ended with them joining in a full union, and now that they had reached Inanna, the primal and demanding urgency that drove them there was gone, so they took their time, exulting in the rediscovery of their love at a whole new level of depth and understanding. They took it slow and it was like making love for the first time, all over again.

They undressed each other slowly, reverently. Samantha undid Liara's armor one piece at a time and laid it to the side, then unzipped her under-armor shirt and slowly rolled it off her shoulders. Shepard's fingertips feathered across Liara's chest and Shepard stepped around behind her, slowly peeling the shirt down as her lips trailed gently across now bare shoulders. She knelt down behind the Asari and pulled the sleeves past the tips of blue fingers, and tossed the shirt to the side, completely baring her torso. Hands ran up past shapely hips and wrapped just barely onto her abdomen as she planted her first kisses atop the bared folds in Liara's lower back. Liara took a sharp inhale of breath in her surprise, but Sam did not enter the sensitive folds. [Not yet.]

Shepard stood back up, slowly. Her hands maintained solid contact on Liara's torso and stretched tired dorsal muscles upward until Sam got to the right height where her hands slid forward and tenderly cupped, then affectionately kneaded, ample blue breasts. As she started to nuzzle Liara's neck, the eezo was so sharp she could taste it and the scent of Thessian rose was strong, like she was standing in the middle of a field full of them. Her hot breath and kisses tickled Liara's crests, but again, Sam was careful to not penetrate into any of the folds. Liara's eyes fluttered closed and her head lolled back onto Shepard's shoulder as a high tide of happiness and contentment flooded through the link, almost overpowering her senses. Shepard quietly laughed. [That good, huh?]

Liara lifted her head, opened her eyes back up and beamed. [Goddess, yes. It feels wonderful, Samantha! It's like the first time you ever gave me a massage...with emotions added in and amplified through the meld. Though it's also definitely different because I'm standing.]

Shepard laughed again. [Is that a hint, T'Soni?]
Liara smiled and turned in the commander's grasp so they were face to face again. [Not at all, love. Merely an observation.] Liara slowly unbuttoned Samantha's shirt and pushed it off her shoulders. Shepard shrugged and shook her arms, and the shirt dropped to the floor. After repaying the favor of a light upper body massage combined with a generous portion of gentle caresses and soothing kisses, Liara planted an evocatively deep kiss on Samantha's lips. [Now that's a hint, Shepard]

Shepard grinned. [That's no hint, Liara. That's an open invitation.] Liara squeaked in surprise when Samantha scooped her up and carried her to the bed, laying her down gently. She quickly removed Liara's boots and peeled her bodysuit pants down, tugging them off past her feet and tossing them over by her shirt on the floor. Shepard pulled off her own boots and then dropped her pants where she stood before climbing onto the bed with her lover.

Their lovemaking was taken at the same pace as their getting undressed. Slow and sensuous, they took the time to investigate every sensation; every tweak, every moist pop, every slow, torturously delicious stroke. The exploratory tease built the sexual tension to an amazing height before they couldn't stand anymore and begged release. When they came, they sang as one, crashing together over the precipice into a blinding storm of ecstasy, again and again for what seemed an eternity, during which the outside world ceased to exist. Surprisingly, there was no sudden collapse back to reality. Instead, a tapering series of glorious aftershocks cushioned the return to their senses as one eased into two. Liara dropped the meld and, while the link was still very much there, they both opted to verbalize their professions of love aloud. Being somewhat rested and well fed for a change, neither one of them was overly tired. Knowing they would be parted on the morrow, they continued to snuggle and exchange loving caresses and other meaningful expressions of affection until sleep finally claimed them some time later.

The Normandy popped through the relay into the Crescent Nebula, in the same system as Illium, though Shepard had no intention of returning to the surface. She did not want to explain her presence without Liara at her side. Edi transmitted all the logged data and Shepard transmitted all her microburst messages. Joker informed her of an urgent request for communication from the Council. When she told Joker she didn't have time, he hesitantly told her it was Tevos...only Tevos. That stopped Shepard in her tracks; Tevos she was willing to talk to, so informed Joker she was on her way.

"I really am sorry, Councilor. You personally have been very good to me, but I'm not at liberty to disclose that information over this comm system. Liara was ambushed by a Spectre, and Spectres have access to Council communications... I just can't chance it. You know Liara's safety is paramount to me. Perhaps if I get back to the Citadel we can meet in person and I can give you more information." Shepard sighed, wishing, of all people, she didn't have to keep Tevos in the dark. She could be a good ally, but not involving the Shadow Broker. "I will tell you that Liara is in hiding, alive and well, and not aboard the Normandy, which is more than I've told anyone else, and probably more than I should have said to you. I've dealt with the members of the merc army that staged the attack... but this is far from over, in the larger picture. Other than that, it will be a story for Liara to tell, if and when she is ready. I'm sorry. Please don't take it personally."

Tevos frowned, not exactly happy with the lack of details, but not disappointed with what she did get, either. "I see, Commander. And I suppose I know you better than to try and convince you to break any trust Liara may have placed in you."

Shepard smiled. "Thank you, Councilor. Yes, that would just put a strain on our relationship... our friendship... that I would rather not have to work around. You certainly do know me better than the other councilors could ever hope to. Please, just trust me on this."
Tevos caught the emphasis on the word friendship and gave in. "Well, you really leave me no choice. Do you, Shepard?" Tevos sighed. "Very well. Do you anticipate heading this way any time in the near future?"

Shepard paused in thought. "Seeing as I'm currently restricted to the Terminus, by Council decree, I don't foresee that being any time soon. On top of that, my next lead is taking me all the way over to the Rosetta Nebula. After that, who knows? Depends on if I get any more leads or not." Shepard hesitated for the briefest of moments before she continued. "Tevos... I want to tell you, I really do. I just... can't. Not now." *Maybe not ever.*

"I understand, Commander." It was Tevos' turn to look torn; she eventually continued as well. "Shepard. Finish this business with the Collectors and with Cerberus. The Council... Tides! The Council banned you from Citadel space! I... *I miss you*... I felt safer when you were with us. Come home soon."

Shepard was shocked by Tevos' open admission and a very infrequent show of frustration with the Council's politics. *Like... never!* She was also glad that her blush wouldn't show through the holographic display. "I'm working on it, believe me. And I'm still with you, Tevos. I never left." Shepard actually barked out a short laugh and smirked as she finished, "Well, except while I was in a medical coma, dead to the world. If *you* call, I'll be there if I can. But, I'm very busy right now... I wasn't even going to take this until I heard it was you, by yourself. Say hello to Huntress Tenir for me. Goddess be with you, Tevos."

Tevos responded in kind, and her face was wearing a light smile as the screen went to black.
Shepard planned for the Normandy to sit in the Crescent Nebula for only a brief period of time, just long enough to transmit everything they needed to transmit. Officially, that included Edi's backlogged data and Miranda's mission report, the latter of which was the greatest cause for concern. Miranda had to explain how Liara had surprised them all and stepped in to take over as the new Shadow Broker, when they had all expected her to join Shepard on the Normandy. She also had to pass the location of the ship to TIM, or he would be dangerously curious as to why Miranda would withhold that information. That meant the clock started ticking on Liara's back up plan. The only saving grace was he probably wouldn't dare make a move against Liara until the Collectors were dealt with, else he risked alienating Shepard; not in his, Cerberus' or humanity's best interest, so they had some time. Shepard had sent all of her burst transmissions as well and then the minute she ended her call with Tevos, Joker jumped the relay to the Aquila System in the Ismar Frontier. It would be a few hours over to the Faia System, so Shepard drafted a personal update to send to her newly established distribution list. Their destination, Zorya, was the second of four planets from its sun, so even once they reached Faia, it was another hour to landfall. During that time, Shepard utilized the system's comm buoys to fire up her burst transmitter and was surprised by a number of return pings. She laughed when she read Riana's reply; the commando had taken her instructions about keeping each message to two hundred characters or less to new extremes. Her response to the entire litany of instructions Shepard sent? Understood.

Liara had sent a message already and Shepard grinned in satisfaction as she read it. She had arranged with Kasumi to do her a special favor before they left the Broker ship, and the master thief had apparently been successful at inserting a very special data file onto Liara's omnitool without her knowledge, purposely to be discovered after their departure.

Don't want to know how... Tali not with you! Thought I had good security? You know my favorites. Green looks good on you, and always love jeans and boots. Thank you... Love you.

Most important was a response from Niria, much quicker than Shepard ever anticipated.

Told you, if you ever need me I'd be there! Awaiting instruction. Need 2 weeks to terminate current employment, but Arlyna ready and able to depart immediately. Where and when?

Shepard had anticipated them agreeing so already had a message prepped to send back. What she didn't anticipate was separate availability times, so she had to modify the instructions a bit, but nothing drastic. She sent instructions to Matron Lyessa at the T'Soni Estate that Huntress Arlyna Sheya would be arriving to take one of the ships in dry dock, so she was to have the fleet master prep the personal transport Rakhana for immediate pickup and then do the same for Tazzik's ship, the Chiroquol, two weeks later. She then passed the instructions for both transactions to Niria, including Arlyna's rendezvous time and location. Niria's instructions would have to come later when the time got closer. She also received notes from Culver, her mom, and Anderson, but she felt no need to reply right away; besides, they were rapidly approaching Zorya and she needed to get ready.
They initially hit the ground as one group and Shepard was glad Zaeed saw fit to give them the full briefing on the Blue Suns home office world. Almost the entire planet was jungle and loading up on antihistamines had been essential before stepping off the shuttle into the pollen and fungal filled air. As they approached the drop zone, they all caught a glimpse of their target; the refinery was obviously in full operation, the main stacks dumping copious amounts of more crap into the atmosphere. Apparently the Blue Suns could give a shit about the environment and long-term air quality; there was no profit in it.

Zaeed took the immediate lead, having at one time been the leader of the Blue Suns, he knew their protocols and security procedures like the back of his hand. "Tapping into Blue Suns communications. Just follow the path, stay tight, and watch out for ambushes."

As they moved down the trail, Zaeed growled as Vido's voice came over the comms. "Squad Bravo, a shuttle landed near your location. Check it out."

His growl was quickly followed by a smirk of satisfaction. "They know we're here. Keep close!" He looked for Shepard and muttered. "They aren't going to play nice, so don't bother trying... especially once they see me." Shepard scowled, but nodded in agreement; this was Zaeed's call, at least until they entered the facility and split up.

The first thing they came upon was a pile of corpses. Zaeed didn't even blink as he announced, "Shot in the back and left to rot. That's definitely Vido's style. He hasn't changed in that aspect at least. Maybe he'll be predictable."

They pressed down the trail, running across nothing for a while except wild pyjaks scampering across the trail on occasion. They finally heard Vido again telling his troops to take defensive positions. Shepard glanced over the team, "Stay sharp, everyone. They're going to be ready and waiting for us."

Grunt let out a low chuckle. "No one's ever ready for us, Shepard."

The commander grinned but said nothing, though she had to agree with Grunt. No one in their right mind would expect the force currently headed toward the refinery. It wasn't every day you ran into a Spectre, Archangel and an Alliance Corsair on one hand and Zaeed Massani, a Krogan and an STG operative on the other. They certainly were quite the band of misfits, but their very diversity is what made them so dangerous. As they rounded one last corner, a dispatcher sounded on their comms calling units to the southern checkpoint for armed intruders. Jacob sounded off, "Here we go! Bogey straight ahead, 12 o'clock!"

The initial force was only four troops, the biggest problem being a rocket trooper on an upper level, but once Jacob got a visual on him, he reached out with his biotics and yanked him off the balcony and let him fall to his death with a phrase Shepard had heard many times before. "Gravity's a real bitch!"

There was no break before reinforcements started rolling in, three more troops ran up the hill along with a Fenris mech; again, no match for the power six. It was obvious there had to be a camera or surveillance system in play, because the dispatcher was hot on the horn again, "They're getting torn to shreds out there! All squads! Fall back!"

As the team reached the final bridge before the main facility, the entire team got a taste of who they were up against when Vido responded to the dispatcher's orders to fall back. "This is Commander Santiago. If any of you retreat while the intruders are still alive, I'll kill you myself. All squads, mass
at the southern gatehouse! Now!"

It wasn't the words that got Shepard, but the total conviction and lack of compassion in the tone. This man didn't lead people, he used them and would sacrifice them all to a man, just to get what he wanted. Shepard now understood why it was the Blue Suns that the Collectors had contracted to recover her body. There was a phrase, 'honor among thieves.' This man had no such code. He was just like the previous Shadow Broker; he would do anything, sacrifice everyone, just to make a deal or save his own skin... and it helped explain why Vido Santiago needed to die.

They entered the facility shields up, barriers active and weapons drawn... and were immediately confronted by Vido himself. "Zaeed Massani. You finally tracked me down."

Zaeed growled out Vido's name and reached for his assault rifle as Vido sneered, "Don't be stupid, Zaeed. I have a whole company of bloodthirsty bastards behind me, ready to kill or be killed on my command." Zaeed's eyes never stopped moving, and they finally passed over a gas main just above where Vido was standing. His eyes snapped back to the leader of the Blue Suns as Vido continued speaking. "Actually, take your shot. Give my men a reason to put you down like the mad dog you are. Again."

Zaeed yelled "Cover!" as he rattled a few shots off, puncturing the gas main.

Vido scornfully mocked him, "What the hell was that? Gone nearsighted, you old coot?"

Zaeed snickered as he drawled out, "Burn, you son of a bitch!" and launched an incendiary round up onto the balcony Vido and his men were standing on. The gas main exploded, destroying the balcony and the door below it.

Zaeed's shout of warning gave Vido time to retreat, and he yelled back from behind the flames, "You just signed your death warrant, Massani!"

Shepard jumped up and growled at Zaeed, "What the hell, Zaeed? You trying to make my life more difficult?"

Zaeed chuckled in response, "Relax, Shepard. I got the door open, didn't I? Besides, now you actually have something to do other than babysit workers. You get to activate the fire suppression systems while I find Vido and kill him."

Shepard snarled, "I'm trying to save this refinery and the people in it! We don't sacrifice lives unnecessarily! There's always a better way."

Zaeed got in her face, "Like what? Wandering around the jungle for hours, trying to find another way in while Vido escapes? I'm not sacrificing my mission for yours! We're here for me! You want my help on your mission, you better make damn sure I catch and kill him. Here. Now."

Shepard's eyes narrowed as she clenched her fist in anger before she felt Garrus' calming hand on her shoulder. "Fine. Then quit wasting time and go catch him, while we try to figure out how the hell to get this gas fire out!"

As Zaeed, Grunt and Mordin disappeared behind a wall of flame, Garrus shook his head. "What is it with you and fire, Shepard? Let's get this done and keep Zaeed from killing any more than he needs to."

Just as they were ready to follow Zaeed into the refinery, a worker ran out onto an upper gangway and started yelling, "Help! We're trapped! We can't get to the gas valves to shut them off! The whole place is going to blow!"
As Zaeed, Grunt and Mordin entered into the first large processing room, they heard Vido vow, "I'll take you out, Massani!" The Blue Suns leader was nowhere to be seen, but the three mercs who were there to slow down or stop the team down did nothing but quickly die from the Normandy team's gunfire. As the team rounded a corner and moved forward, an exit on the far side opened and three more mercs ran straight into death's arms. With Zaeed's guidance, Grunt was in heaven. The only direction he received was, "We're moving as fast as we can to catch Vido. If it gets in your way, kill it and move on."

Grunt had a lot of respect for Battlemaster Shepard, but sometimes it felt good to just let the blood rage go... and kill things. Combined with Grunt's brute force and Mordin's long reach with his incineration tech attacks, they made quick work of the next group of mercs as well, even though there was a total of eight opponents. Zaeed was very good at what he did, but he also had to concede that Shepard knew what she was doing when she selected the squad to go with him. They played off each other perfectly, even though the three of them had never before worked together as a team.

They crossed a long bridge and entered another section of the refinery, that seemed to be more of an open warehousing or transshipment area. Conveyors moved material crates and fuels containers overhead, and various pipes and storage tanks littered the floor. Once again, they heard Vido yelling at them. "I'll bring this place down around your ears!"

Chaos erupted. Doors on each side of the room opened and the team suddenly found themselves flanked and had to retreat to cover, back where they first entered the room. A number of the troops carried flamethrowers, with fuel canisters on their backs, and they regretted it quickly. Mordin concentrated on them and blasted them with incineration attacks, causing them to explode and take out any of their teammates unlucky enough to be standing close to them. While Grunt focused on the normal troops, Zaeed shot out support brackets and dropped overhead fuel tanks down on the enemy. Just when they thought they were done and started moving toward the large doors in the back to head out to the loading docks, those very doors opened and a heavy mech stepped in, blocking their path and immediately unloading with its twin automatic mass accelerator cannons as the team dived for cover.

Following the directions from the worker, Shepard's team jumped a short wall and pressed into the building’s lower levels, on the hunt for the main gas valves. They came to the locked door and entered the code the worker provided as gas lines continued to explode around them, Garrus now busy ducking his head instead of shaking it. They moved through the facility as quickly as possible, occasionally having to detour around burning debris or collapsed floor segments, but they continued to make steady progress even though visibility was decreasing by the second because of accumulating smoke. Suddenly they heard a female voice over an intercom, "Upstairs! The extinguishing system control is upstairs!"

Jacob shouted out through the smoke, somewhere off to the right. "The steps are over here!" Shepard and Garrus stumbled in the direction of the voice and found the stairs, but no Jacob. They assumed he had continued up without them and pressed onward.

The same female voice rang out a second time, "The doors won't open until the fire's out! Hurry, please!" She coughed as she finished her plea and Shepard realized their time was running out. When they found the control console, Jacob was already there and working his way through the menu. Jacob was not pleased. "God damn it! You'd think they'd have a big emergency stop button, and not have to run through four layers of 'Are you sure you wish to terminate operations'"
questions!" Finally he shouted in triumph and the fuel valve was closed. "Now we just need to activate the fire suppression system!"

Garrus was already halfway up the stairs and yelled back down, "I'm on it!"

As Jacob and Shepard watched, foam suppressant started flooding the refinery. Shepard whooped in victory. "Alright! Let's go catch up with Zaeed at the docks!"

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Shepard's team progressed rapidly through the refinery at that point; Zaeed's team had been thorough, and no Blue Suns remained to hinder their movements. They picked up speed when they heard the roar of gunfire ahead and ducked into cover when they saw a heavy mech spitting thousands of rounds at Zaeed's team. At that moment, Shepard really wished Liara was at her side so they could double-team it with biotics. A singularity-warp explosion would have been perfect, but Shepard had to settle for mostly conventional tactics. "Garrus, overload that thing's shields!"

Mordin heard the shout and readied an incineration attack. It wouldn't do much against shields, but once they were dropped it would put a serious hurting on the armor. Everyone who had it, queued up their incendiary ammunition as well, and when they saw the mech's shields spark and falter, they all lit it up at the same time. Even a heavy mech couldn't withstand the concentrated firepower of all six team members, and they were soon on their way out the loading dock doors.

As they stepped out, they saw Vido Santiago limping toward the ramp that led up to his gunship. With the team was reunited, Zaeed surprisingly looked to Shepard. She just shook her head and waved her hand toward Vido, indicating for Zaeed to take the lead; she was giving him the call. He drew his pistol and planted a shot in the ground in front of Vido, who stopped dead and spun around to find the shooter. His eyes flew open wide in shock and he started begging, "Zaeed. Please. You know it was nothing personal. Just business, I swear!" He quickly turned away and limped faster in an attempt to find cover or maybe even escape, hoping Zaeed would just let him go.

Zaeed's pistol came up again and he shot Vido in his good leg, driving the Blue Suns leader to the ground, falling into a large puddle of fuel. Vido went back to begging, "It was twenty years ago! Look at you, I did you a favor!" Zaeed said nothing and just stared as a smirk of grim satisfaction crossed his face. Vido knew from the look his begging hadn't worked, so he kept trying, "Shepard, please! I'm gonna die here! You can't let him kill me in cold blood!"

Shepard let out an eerie guttural laugh. "You assholes tried to sell me to the Collectors. Then you did your pitiful best to kill us all today... and you expect sympathy from me?" She cocked back on one hip, crossed her arms over her chest, looked at Zaeed and shrugged.

Zaeed's lip curled up in scorn. "Oh, let's see, what was it you said? Oh, yeah. If any of you retreat while the intruders are still alive, I'll kill you myself. I'm happy to help you with that." Zaeed emptied his clip quickly, shooting at anything but Vido until the pistol stopped firing. Vido eyed the old mercenary hopefully, until Zaeed ejected a glowing hot thermal clip and slung it toward the large puddle of fuel Vido was sitting in. "Fry, you son of a bitch."

His brief hope dashed, Vido's eyes went wide with panic as he lunged forward in an attempt to deflect the thermal clip from its trajectory. He missed.

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When they got back on board the Normandy, Joker was hot on the comms telling Shepard she had received an urgent call from Admiral Hackett and he requested she return his call as soon as possible
from a secure location. She acknowledged him and went to her quarters to remove her armor and placed the call from her private terminal. She figured it really was important when Hackett answered so promptly he had to have been sitting on the secure terminal waiting for the call. "Commander. Thank you for your time. I'll keep this brief. We have a deep cover operative out in Batarian space. Name's Dr Amanda Kenson. She recently reported finding evidence of an imminent Reaper invasion."

Shepard's head snapped up at mention of the Reapers. "So, you're mobilizing the fleet and are ready to take me back to help, now that the Reapers may actually show themselves?"

"Not exactly." Hackett sighed. "Just this morning, I received word that the Batarians arrested her. They're holding her in a secret prison outpost on terrorism charges."

Her short-lived optimism thrown to the side, Shepard scoffed in antipathy. "So why call me? Get one of your N7s."

Hackett's face went blank for a second, initially surprised that she would blow him off so easily. After contemplating her situation, he looked somewhat ashamed as he continued. "I guess the Alliance deserves that, but you know I'm in your corner." Hackett refocused. "We can't have this linked back to the Alliance, Shepard, so I'm asking you to go as a personal favor to me. Dr Kenson is a friend. I need you to go in alone and infiltrate the prison. Get her out of there and all the data she has on the Reapers is yours."

Shepard's brow furrowed in thought. "You said she was deep cover. What's she actually doing out there that could be considered terrorism?"

Hackett shook his head. "I have no idea. She's deep cover, we talk only when we have to. I heard she was investigating a rumor of a Reaper artifact in the system. Her last report said she found it. My guess is she was caught trying to destroy it."

"So how'd she get caught?" Shepard assumed she wasn't an infiltrator or demolitions expert and got caught doing something she wasn't trained to do. "What's her specialty?"

"I can't tell you much, Shepard, just that she's a top scientist and an Alliance agent out in Batarian space. It's a deadly assignment, and she's one of the few up to the challenge. At least we thought she was. Until this." Hackett hung his head, knowing it was very possible the assignment got her killed. "She and I go back pretty far, Commander. I won't let her rot away in a Batarian torture camp."

"Understood, Sir. That must have been some proof she found." Shepard was actually more interested in the artifact than in Kenson.

"Sorry, Commander, but I don't have any more info. Just that she found an artifact and says it's proof of a coming invasion. If you want more, you'll have to get to Kenson." Hackett was starting to realize this was a hard-sell. With the way the Alliance had treated Shepard since her return, he couldn't really blame her.

"I've got my own mission right now, Admiral, and we're losing more colonists every week. Alliance colonists that you aren't doing much about." Shepard shook her head, "And, you want me to go in alone? When I get a break we'll take the Normandy and get it done."

"No. If the Batarians see a squad of armed soldiers coming, they'll kill Kenson. And since she's Alliance, I'm sure they'll tie the two together and blame us, whether you're wearing Alliance colors or not. We have enough trouble getting ready for the Reapers. We can't afford a war with the Batarians, too." The Admiral paused before making his final entreaty. "As much as I'd hate to leave
Amanda hanging in the wind, it's alone or nothing, Shepard. The Alliance can't risk anything else."

Shepard finally agreed to do it, but wouldn't commit to a timeline. "As I said, Admiral. I'll do it when I get a break, and that may not be until after my trip through the Omega-4 relay. But consider it added to my list."

Hackett breathed a small sigh of relief, realizing it was probably the best response he could realistically hope for. "Thank you, Shepard. The prison is hidden underground at an outpost on Aratoht. I'll upload the coordinates now. Once Kenson's secure, confirm her discovery. We'll debrief you when you get back."

Shepard nodded. "Understood, Admiral, but don't thank me yet. I'm not sure I'll get there in time."

"I trust you'll get it done, Shepard. Hackett out."

Since she was in her room anyway, Shepard typed up a quick message to Liara and fired up the burst transmitter.

*Special mission request from Hackett. Need info on Dr Amanda Kenson. Held on Aratoht. Batarian underground prison. Found Reaper artifact, proves Reaper invasion imminent?*

As soon as it was sent the transmitter beeped, indicating an incoming message, and shut down. She was surprised to have yet another message from Liara.


Shepard realized she had to pass this info to Samara, but had other business to attend to first. Things were starting to get extremely busy, and tasks were piling up faster than she could get them done. When they were after Saren, they were begging for leads...with the Collectors, stuff was flying at them at a much faster pace, forcing her to prioritize. She instructed Joker to head to the rendezvous coordinates near the relay in the Aquila System. During transit, she paid a visit to Karin just for the doctor's piece of mind. The Cerberus implants helped her heal at an amazing rate, but that didn't mean that Aunt Karin would stop worrying about her. The woman still liked to lay eyes on the commander and see for herself she was ok. Shepard complained about it regularly, but she really wouldn't have it any other way. After that, she grabbed some chow at the mess and then hit the rack, telling Joker to notify her when either the *Aletheia* or the *Rakhana* showed on scope. Arlyna and the *Rakhana* showed up first; Shepard met her at the airlock as the Asari boarded the Normandy.

There were tears in Arlyna's eyes when the hatch opened and her voice waivered as she spoke. "*Sim're.* I attended your memorial with Karin and your mother after Alchera. I did not truly believe when I got word you were alive, but now I see with my own eyes. Once again you restore my faith in the Goddess." She closed quickly and wrapped Shepard in a tight hug.

"*Come, Ai'a me,* I have someone eagerly waiting to see you." Shepard led the way to the med bay. Knowing Karin's space was completely free of surveillance equipment, once the kissing and hellos were done with, Shepard explained the whole situation to Arlyna, whose eyes opened wide with surprise a number of times but she did not interrupt Shepard's tale.

"So your Liara brings you back from the dead and is now the new Shadow Broker. And you want me to work in her employ?" Arlyna's voice was pitched with disbelief.

"That's the long and short of it. Yes." Shepard's face was grim. "I know it's a lot to take in, and
you're welcome to stay for a while and think it over, but I'm afraid you can't call home to talk to Niria about it. It's not safe."

"Shepard. I do not need to think about it. It's just as unbelievable as you being alive after the Normandy destruction, but you have my complete devotion and the answer is an absolute yes."
Arlyna shook her head. "Reapers. Collectors. It is all fantastical, yet if what you say is true, I must help you. And I know Niria. She will as well. My word is my bond. Tell me what I need to know."

Since the Rakhana already had the Shadow Broker IFF codes, all Arlyna needed was the approach and contact instructions. As they were going over final details, the commandos showed up on the Aletheia and Riana and Livos Tanni brought a shuttle to the Normandy. As the commandos disembarked, Riana was already speaking. "Shepard, tell me you've found her."

Shepard raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. "Honestly, Riana, I never lost her. It was part of a cover..." She didn't get to finish her sentence before Riana's hand lashed out and a resounding crack filled the air. Shepard's head jerked from the force of the slap planted on her cheek.

"How could you do that to me?" Riana was livid at the deception. "I feared Mistress Liara was lost to me!"

Arlyna immediately jumped to Shepard's defense, her hands starting to go blue as she pulled her biotics and Shepard quickly stepped between them, her hands and voice raised to stop whatever was about to happen. "Whoa! Hold on! Shit, Riana, that was a good one. Maybe deserved, but I think not. You'll understand when I explain." Shepard wiggled her jaw and then smiled, which went a long way toward diffusing the tense situation. "So. How about I make introductions and you let me explain everything before we all try to beat one another up?"

Both Arlyna and Riana nodded curtly and Shepard continued. "Let me start by saying I trust every one of you with my life, and we are all friends here... even though you may not know it yet." She looked first to Arlyna. "This is Huntress Arlyna Sheya. She was my biotics instructor... the one who taught me to Echo. She is also a long-time family friend, knows both Dr Chakwas and my mother, and knows who Liara is, though I've never had the opportunity to introduce them in person yet. Being dead to the world for a couple years kinda screwed up the social calendar a bit."

Shepard turned to the other two. "This is Huntress Riana Iregos, Liara's First and part-time brokerage assistant. And this is Commando Captain Livos Tanni, Liara's Illium commando team lead. They can introduce you to the rest of the team later." From there, Shepard dragged the entire group to her quarters and told the Shadow Broker portion of the story again for Riana and Livos. After the explanations were complete and everyone's questions answered, Riana apologized, realizing every action Shepard had taken was with the sole purpose of Liara's protection.

Riana then looked at Arlyna. "And you, Huntress Sheya. If you are committed enough to Shepard as to jump so quick to her defense, we will be good friends. Very good if you are willing to do the same for Lady T'Soni."

Arlyna spoke very frankly. "I owe Shepard a debt of life that I have held for seven years. If she asks me to protect the Lady T'Soni, I shall do so with my life."

Riana's face lit up at the mention of the debt and she smiled, her eyes traveling toward the commander before returning to Arlyna. "That does not surprise me. Shepard makes a habit of putting her own life in danger for the sake of others. Should you be willing, I would be keen to hear the story."
**Those Closest Hurt the Most**

Chapter Notes

CIC - Command Information Center
Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)
Tides - Asari saying commonly invoked to put aside frustration; an expression of exasperation.

**The detailed story of the Theshaca pirate raids mentioned in the first paragraph is told in QuickShot 13, Too Close for Comfort.**

After the discussions with the commandos, Shepard sent them all on their way to Hagalaz to rendezvous at the Broker ship, Riana traveling with Arlyna, both to keep her from being alone and to hear the story of the Theshaca pirate raids. As soon as the *Rakhana* and the *Aletheia* disappeared beyond the relay, Shepard shouted at Joker to lay in a course for Omega and headed off to talk to Samara. As Shepard walked into the observation lounge, the Justicar was in her standard lotus position on the floor, but was just ending her meditations. She stood as Shepard entered the room. "Perfect timing, Commander. I have time to talk, if you would like."

Shepard's face was grim. "I'd love to, Samara, but I'm actually here on business this time. I received a message from Liara saying she tracked down your fugitive under the name of Morinth. She booked passage to Omega four days ago."

Samara's eyes narrowed. "Dr T'Soni did this for me? To what purpose? Information brokers travel in dark spaces and I will not pay for her services."

Along with her disapproving facial expression, Shepard also caught an underlying tone she didn't like in Samara's statement. "You should understand why I don't have to pay for her services. What exactly are you getting at, Samara?"

Samara's expression went blank but her voice was solemn. "Commander. You were correct to question me before accepting me to your mission. If it were not for my vow, many of your associates would no longer be with us." The hair on the back of Shepard's neck raised as Samara continued. "Information Brokers perform unconscionable acts in the name of profit, and Dr T'Soni would fall into that category, and she garners more attention than the others since she is completely under the authority of the Justicars by being a fellow Asari."

Shepard's eyes glinted in anger. "You once said if I did anything particularly dishonorable, you would have to kill me when you were released from the oath. If that means my crew and my bondmate are also at risk when this mission is over, I may be inclined to never release you, Samara." The Justicar's eyes widened a bit at this announcement, but Shepard ignored it and continued. "Certainly not until the Reapers are dealt with and the real war is over. Then we'll see. Assuming we survive, that is."

"You would keep me bound to you to save the lives of criminals?" Samara was genuinely puzzled, thinking the commander a much more honorable person than one to consider the lifetime bondage of a Justicar, over the lives of thieves and cutthroats.
"Damn it, Samara!" Shepard paced madly in the small space available. "Your code is way too rigid if it would demand the deaths of the twelve souls responsible for saving the lives of every organic being in the whole damn galaxy! Things are not so black and white as that! With such a selfless act, they have each redeemed themselves. So to answer your question, yes, I would keep you bound to protect them for their good deeds. Especially if one of those people is the kindest, most loving, dedicated, honest and committed soul I have ever had the good fortune to know."

Samara blinked. "I will meditate more on this issue, Commander. But for now, let us return to the topic at hand. Morinth."

Shepard snorted. "You mean the incredibly dangerous fugitive that my information broker bondmate just found for you? The one I have already told Joker to lay a course to Omega for. So we can go get her before she has a chance to leave the station? That Morinth?" She stared hard at the Justicar, her jaw clenched in simmering resentment.

Refusing to be rankled, Samara closed her eyes and nodded in respect. "Yes, Commander. Morinth. As I said, I will meditate more on this issue. You have given me much to contemplate. In the four hundred years I have been a Justicar, none have ever challenged my beliefs so thoroughly. I am... glad you came." She paused briefly before continuing. "Thank you, Shepard. For heading directly to Omega. This is the best opportunity I've ever had. Hopefully we can apprehend her before she disappears again."

Shepard exhaled heavily and rolled her head around, stretching her neck and trying to release some of her frustration. "Don't thank me. Thank Liara." Shepard turned and walked to the door. "I'll have Joker give you a one-hour out call when we approach the station."

As Shepard and Samara entered Omega station, Edi came over the comms. "The daily death count on Omega is too high for me to pinpoint an Ardat-Yakshi's location."

Shepard just rolled her eyes. "That's ok, Edi. Aria'd have my head if we did any police action on her station without talking to her first, anyway. We'll just go ask her what she knows."

It was obvious Aria knew they were there and that she was expecting them. They walked into Afterlife and strolled straight to Aria's lair unimpeded. She glanced up and nodded at the commander to take a seat. Her face held absolutely no expression, but her eyes burned with an intensity that gave Shepard goose bumps. "Shepard. You're causing a lot of shit storms, but I'm happy to see you're honoring our agreement and leaving Omega assets alone. You've obviously been a busy woman, so what brings you back to me? With a Justicar, no less."

Shepard was surprised by the seemingly cordial welcome and wondered if Aria could sense the current friction between her and Samara. Shepard had fully expected a more hostile encounter, having brought a Justicar right to the heart of the den of inequity called Afterlife. She was sure that Aria didn't welcome many so readily into her circle, so decided to take advantage of Aria's good grace and got straight to the point. "An Asari fugitive is hiding out here. An Ardat-Yakshi. I'm here with Justicar Samara to apprehend her."

Shepard realized Aria was being so accepting because she already knew why they were on Omega and she was happy for their help. The look on Aria's face and her next words confirmed it. "I knew it. Nothing leaves a body quite so...empty... as an Ardat-Yakshi does." Her good will, however, did not completely extend to the Justicar and Aria's brow wrinkled with distaste as Samara spoke.

"You haven't taken steps to kill her?" There was no accusation in Samara's voice, just curiosity.
Aria rolled her eyes. "Why would I? She hasn't tried to seduce me. Most of my men wouldn't stand a chance and unless I have to, I won't risk the few loyal troops who could withstand her...charms."

Aria settled back into her couch and her face finally settled into a more typical expressionless mask. It was back to business as usual. "Her last victim was a young human girl. Pretty thing. Lived in the tenements near here." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Bray can give you the address. That's where I'd start looking."

Shepard nodded and stood up. "Thanks for the help."

Aria ignored Samara and looked Shepard directly in the eye. "Good luck finding her. Better luck catching her. Odd as it may be, I've decided to like you, Shepard, so try not to get yourself killed in the process." The smirk on Aria's face made it difficult for Shepard to determine if she meant the words, or if she said them to get under the Justicar's skin. Either way didn't really matter; Aria had pointed them in the right direction to get them started on the hunt.

When they got to the apartment in question, they were met by Diana, the girl's mother. She was very thankful someone was finally checking into her daughter's death; Nef had been dead three days and no one had yet started the investigation. She quickly described her daughter, answered their questions and hesitantly let them look around Nef's room. Inside, they listened to the girl's diary, where she spoke of Morinth and of meeting her in the VIP lounge of Afterlife after dropping the name Jaruut to get in the door.

Samara's voice was slightly strained as she spoke. "This is Morinth's work. She is attracted to artists and creators. Someone with a spark but isolated from their peers. She controls her victims through sheer will. She loves the club scene and drugs are a part of her lifestyle. She's a hedonist, first impressing with sophistication and sex appeal and then she strikes. The hunt interests her as much as the kill."

Shepard shook her head. "Anyone who's successfully hunted sapient beings for four hundred years is dangerous...and Nef was dead the day after Morinth's arrival. She works fast. How the hell are we supposed to catch her?"

Samara closed her eyes. "Morinth speaks to you on many levels. Her body tells you she'll bring unimaginable ecstasy. Her scent evokes emotion long hidden. Her eyes promise you things you were always scared to ask of another. Her voice still whispers to you after she is done speaking."

Shepard raised her eyebrows. "You make her sound more like a deadly consort than a diseased Asari."

Samara's eyes flashed. "Do not dishonor the profession of Consort. They are highly trained and provide essential services in many forms. The Ardat-Yakshi are dangerous genetic defects whose disease leads to an incurable hunger. Once they start down the path, there is no salvation and they must be removed...permanently...from the population."

"I meant no offense. I have a very good relationship with Consort Sha'ira...and other than not killing her customers, your description fits her very well; though she is much...more than that." Shepard shook her head as if the shake the comparison out of her thoughts. "So how do we do this? How do we catch Morinth?"

"Storming her den would be a mistake. She will have a hundred escape routes planned. We must lure her out into the open, but I know not how. If she sees me, she'll disappear, go underground. I may not catch sight of her again for fifty years or more."
Shepard pursed her lips for just the briefest of moments before she started speaking, haltingly as she thought out loud. "We know her hunting grounds include the VIP lounge of Afterlife...a lure requires bait...she can't see you, and I refuse to risk an innocent bystander." Shepard looked at Samara. "That only leaves me. You know what attracts her. Do you suppose she might be attracted to me?"

Samara was caught off guard by such an offer. "Yes. I believe she would. You are an artist on the battlefield, and as a commander you stand alone, above your peers. You are the savior of the Citadel...a vital spark that will attract her. Your power should draw her in. You may be a challenge she cannot resist." She hesitated before continuing. "Why would you do this, Shepard? You will have to 'go out' to the club, unarmored and unarmed. Such a thing will be very dangerous, and yet you are still responsible for your own important mission."

"Because everything we do is dangerous and I trust you to have my back, Samara." Shepard shrugged. "And it's the right thing to do. If she is as dangerous as you say, we can't risk her escaping...and our options right at this moment are extremely limited."

Samara pressed on. "Given our previous discussion, you must realize that in the event of your death, my vow to you would be broken."

Shepard's eyes narrowed just a fraction as she spoke. "If that unfortunate future comes to pass, I would hope that you would find it within yourself to honor your vow, at least through the completion of the mission against the Collectors. Knowing it is the right thing to do for the greater good. Just like me taking the time and the risk to help you rid the galaxy of Morinth." Shepard paused and let out a heavy sigh. "And I'm still hoping that your meditations will eventually show you that your code is too restrictive and you would do better to follow your own judgment and morality. You can make up your own mind about what is right and wrong, rather than blindly follow a code's five thousand sutras, that in no way even attempts to weigh the good against the bad in the galaxy. It grants no value to good deeds. Humans have a saying; no good deed goes unpunished. I'm starting to think perhaps it was inspired by a Justicar."

Shepard knew from the expression on Samara's face that she had made some points, but the Justicar was still very intent on the task at hand. "I will think on it, Commander. While I do so, let us waste no more time." Samara indicated she was ready to go and they returned to the Normandy for Shepard to change clothes and for them to come up with their plan of attack.

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Shepard walked up to the VIP lounge door and dropped Jaruut's name, getting into the club with no problem. There was only one door in and out, so Samara would wait for them to exit, then follow them to wherever Morinth led. She would then intervene at the point where she felt Morinth would be most vulnerable. The timing had to be perfect. Morinth would have to be distracted, so the best time would be just as she tried to start the deadly meld with the commander, but Samara would have to intervene before she could actually complete the meld connection. If Samara was early, Morinth could break and run. If she was late, once Morinth actually completed the meld connection, Shepard's life would be forfeit. The Justicar did not take lightly the amount of trust Shepard was putting in her.

As soon as Shepard entered, there was a guy at the door who hit her up. Initially she frowned at him, thinking he was going to hit on her, but it turned out he was just trying to score tickets for some new up and coming sensory band called Expel 10. Shepard wasn't interested in chatting, until he mentioned a really hot Asari who liked the group. He wanted the tickets so he could ask her to go with him. As Shepard walked away, she wondered if the hot Asari happened to be Morinth.

As she was walking through the club, just taking in the scene, a nervous guy flagged her down,
begging for help. He was tech support for an investigative journalist doing research on the Omega gangs. The female reporter was currently chatting with one of the gang leaders, but the gang had made her and she was in danger. The tech needed to get a message to her but was too scared to do it himself. Shepard scoffed, "Seriously? Your co-worker is about to get killed, and you're over here in a panic?"

The solution was simple; Shepard needed to work a pair of code words into a sentence to let the woman know she had to get out of there. Shepard thought about her friend Emily Wong back on the Citadel and immediately agreed to help. She strolled over to the gang leader, asked a couple of seemingly innocent questions and slid the code words in pretty easily. The woman suddenly looked uncomfortable and glanced at her 'date.' "Hey, Florit. I gotta pee." She got up and wandered off, pretending to find a bathroom while actually vanishing into the Omega night.

Next, Shepard headed for the bar, but as she crossed the dance floor, she passed one of the Omega dancers being harassed by a Turian, who was treating her like a hooker. It apparently wasn't the first time, as Shepard heard the dancer blurt out, "I told you before to stay away from me!"

Shepard shook her head in disgust and headed for the bar, not wanting to start a fight and risk getting tossed out of the bar. Instead, she tapped one of the bouncers and pointing out the trouble Turian. The bouncer thanked her and went to help the dancer as Shepard continued to the serving counter. As she walked up, the bartender glanced her way and asked what he could get for her. Shepard just looked at him with distain. "These people are bored. Bored people don't spend much."

The bartender looked at her and leaned on the bar in front of her. "And I suppose you got an idea for how I can fix that?"

Shepard grinned. "Yeah, I do, actually. A round of drinks shows that you appreciate their business. Your rep will improve and they'll keep coming back. You'll have happy customers and make a bunch more money in the long run."

He stood up and grunted. "Hmph. Maybe worth a try once. You better be right!"

Shepard smiled. "Now the party's gonna get started! If this counter isn't hopping within fifteen minutes, I'll be back to pay for the round."

The bartender smiled at that and quickly shouted out, "Hey! Listen up, everyone! We love having you here, so a round of drinks on the house!"

The crowd moved in pretty quickly, and Shepard slipped out to the dance floor, finding an Asari dancing alone. She slid up next to her and started dancing. "Hey, I'm gonna dance next to you. If you want to think we're dancing together, go ahead."

The Asari looked the shapely redhead up and down and smiled, "I do want to think that!"

After dancing for a little while, Shepard decided to make another round through the club. She exited the dance floor and hooked a left to start another loop, but hadn't gotten five steps before a voice spoke to her from the side. "My name is Morirth. I've been watching you. You're the most interesting person in this place. I've got a booth over here. Why don't you come sit with me?"

Shepard looked at her and after a moment's hesitation, nodded in agreement and followed Morinth to her table. As they slid into the booth, Morinth relaxed back into the cushions and made herself right at home. "Some nights I come here and there's no one interesting to talk to. Some nights, there is. Tonight? That person is you. Why is that?"
Shepard let out a short laugh. "Because we're alike. We both know what we like and are willing to step out to take it."

Morinth's eyes flared wide for just a second as she asked, "Yeah? So what do you like here, that you are so willing to take?"

Shepard leaned forward and put her elbows on the table, looking at Morinth. "The music. I like the heavy dance beat. You don't just hear it...you feel it. That's one of the reasons I come."

Morinth nodded gently, "Yes. Dark rhythms. They stir something primitive in me."

Shepard nodded in agreement. "Definitely. I'm real curious about a band I just heard of tonight. Expel 10. They sound very... interesting."

Morinth's expression turned wistful. "They get in my head and tear it to pieces. They're in concert soon; maybe we should go together."

Shepard looked at Morinth appraisingly and put a smirk on her face. "I think I'd be willing to take that."

Seeing and hearing Shepard's assessment, Morinth sat up a bit. "You can lose yourself in the music here, especially if you're willing to... enhance... the experience, you know?"

"Hmmmm. Like Hallex? Party drug of choice." Shepard closed her eyes for just a brief moment. Her true drug of choice was Liara. She pictured her lover's face and thought about the taste of her sweet Asari's lips. letting that sensation wash over her. She relaxed back into the seat and opened her eyes back up to watch Morinth. It was a good thing Morinth couldn't read the commander's mind, and as Shepard thought about Liara, the Asari completely misread her reaction.

"It slithers through my soul." Morinth smiled and licked her lips as if she too was tasting the drug. "Seems like we share some interests."

Shepard looked thoughtful. "Seems like it. Know anything about art?" Shepard cocked her head inquisitively.

Morinth's eyes narrowed, "It speaks to the darkest places in me. What about you?"

Shepard shrugged, "You probably won't know it, but I like Forta."

Morinth's voice registered surprised. "I didn't think anyone around here knew him. He's sublime. Art comes in many varieties. I've seen vids that were more powerful than anything sitting in a gallery."

Shepard laughed. "Yeah, well. Number one, I'm not from around here. I travel a lot so I see a lot of different things. Number two, I love vids. They can be very powerful. I like Vaenia... I could watch it a hundred times. How about you?"

Morinth smiled. "My favorite. The two actresses are so glamorous. I can't get enough of it either. Maybe we can watch it together some time." She paused only briefly before she continued. "So you travel. So many people never see anything but their homeworld. Travel changes you, doesn't it?"

Shepard's eyes sparkled. "Real travel means going to dangerous places."

Morinth spoke so quickly she practically continued the sentence for Shepard. "Where you can see and do things most people can't even imagine." Her eyes fluttered, like images of those things were running across her consciousness.
Shepard's eyes narrowed and she hissed between her teeth, "Yesss."

Encouraged, Morinth continued. "When I travel, I find myself drawn to dark, dangerous places."

Shepard lifted one eyebrow in query, "Violent places?"

Morinth focused on Shepard's face. "Violence is the surest expression of power."

Shepard actually shook her head in gentle disagreement. "No, violence isn't a byproduct. It's a means to an end. Power is that end."

Morinth smirked. "You want to get out of here? My apartment is nearby, and I want you alone."

As they exited, Shepard realized Samara was very good. She had promised to keep an eye on the commander at all times from the shadows, yet Shepard could not discern where she was hiding and observing from. For the plan to work, the same invisibility had to work against Morinth. As they walked into Morinth's apartment and the door closed behind them, Shepard belatedly hoped that Samara was actually still there, somewhere.

Knowing where Shepard was heading and knowing they were after an Ardat-Yakshi, Liara had the info drone watching the live video feeds from Omega for any sign of her lover. Suddenly it was hovering over her shoulder. "Dr T'Soni. Commander Shepard has been located. The feeds are queued for your viewing."

Liara said a quick prayer and went to the video feeds to see what she could see. The images were Shepard and the Justicar going to Afterlife, speaking with Aria, then returning to the Normandy. Liara swore quietly. Not good. It looked like Aria informed them the target had left Omega. She turned to leave and the info drone hovered before her. "Dr T'Soni. Commander Shepard appeared in six videos during the time frame you requested I search. You have reviewed only three. Were my search results non-satisfactory? Shall I adjust my search parameters?"

Liara stopped, a puzzled expression on her face, and returned to the queue to advance the playback to the next video. She got a smile on her face as she watched Shepard and the Justicar leave the Normandy again, this time Samantha was in dress pants and a burgundy top. Curious as to why Shepard would be on a place like Omega dressed up, without her armor and weapons, she watched. Not that the commander was ever truly unarmed; she was a very accomplished biotic, after all, and she was being accompanied by a Justicar. She began to get nervous when the next clip was outside of the Afterlife VIP lounge, Samara vanished, and Shepard went in alone. She flipped quickly to the next video in the queue and as she watched, her nervousness transformed into a bit of jealousy as she watched Shepard work the crowd... then stop to dance with another Asari. Shepard doesn't dance at clubs! Tides! What is going on? Is she drunk?

Liara's jealousy quickly turned to concern when Shepard left the dance floor and was approached by yet another Asari, whom the Shadow Broker instantly recognized from the search conducted to help Samara. Liara's emotion elevated to anguish when she realized the team was hunting and Shepard was the bait. Her distress shot straight to terror when the last video was a series of surveillance shots tracking Shepard as she left the club with the Asari and walked to Morinth's apartment. Liara watched the video in paralyzing horror as the seconds continued to tick by, Samara nowhere in sight, knowing there was absolutely nothing she could do, sitting at Hagalaz. Suddenly, the video ended and the display cut off. Liara spun around and yelled at the drone. "Get this last video feed back live! I need it on screen right now!"
Feron heard the shout and came running in, asking what was wrong. The Drell's cheeks paled from their normal deep blue to an almost ashen color as Liara stammered through a panicked explanation of what was happening. "Goddess of oceans! I'm sure the Justicar must have been in the apartment waiting for them. I'm sure they laid a trap."

By the time the feed came back live, the door to the apartment had been busted open and whatever had happened was history. Liara began to go through dock footage, frantically trying to find evidence of Shepard's second return to the Normandy.

They slipped into the apartment and Morinth locked the door behind them. Nothing unusual for a dangerous place like Omega, so Shepard and Samara had expected it, but it was still not the most comfortable feeling for the commander. Morinth glided into the living room and sat down on a couch, watching Shepard as she took in her surroundings.

Shepard killed time looking around the apartment, ensuring Samara would have time to hack the lock. She noticed weapons displayed on the wall and checked them out. Morinth's commentary sent chills up her spine. "I was into dueling for a while. I love the moment you see it in your opponent's eyes; he knows you're better and he's going to die."

There was also a bottle of Hallex on a table, which neither Shepard nor Morinth were interested in. Morinth was relishing the moment. "Wouldn't you rather have all your senses be clear and sharp right now? I certainly do." Her voice was soft and alluring, like expensive silk sliding across smooth skin; tempting and inviting, trying to draw Shepard in to sit next to her.

Shepard bit the inside of her cheek and thought about the feel of Liara's lips sliding down her neck to kiss the pulse point above her collar bone. The 'after-whisper' of Morinth's voice faded into noise and Shepard headed up a small set of stairs to an upper level. Shepard initially feared she had made a gross error in judgment, as what she thought was just a sitting area also held Morinth's bed, but the Asari didn't budge from her seat on the couch. Breathing a sigh of relief, she saw a chess set, and the Ardat-Yakshi continued the torment. "I love any game where your opponent can believe he is about to win...just before you kill him." Her voice continued to taunt and tease, promising all sorts of pleasures if Shepard would simply join her on the couch.

Shepard stopped in front of a statue of a large Krogan and Morinth's alluring voice tried to slide under Shepard's skin and wrap around her heart. The 'after-whisper' of Morinth's voice faded into noise and Shepard focused solely on the words, and the timbre of Morinth's voice suddenly lost its charm. "A gift from a suitor. The statue's got more personality than he did. Still, he impressed me enough that he finally got what he wanted. It didn't end the way he hoped though."

The apartment was small, and Shepard couldn't stall any more without raising suspicion. She sauntered slowly toward the couch, running a finger gently down the banister for the stairs as she slowly descended. "You have some really nice stuff here. How long have you had the apartment?"

"Oh, I just recently moved in, but I've had my belongings for years. I got bored at my last location. I yearned for more danger, more excitement. What better place than Omega?" Her eyes followed Shepard hungrily as she continued. "I love clubs...people, movement, heat. With the apartment being so close to Afterlife, I can still hear the bass... like the drums of a great hunt, out for your blood."

Shepard finally sat down on the couch, but on the opposite section of the 'L.' Morinth looked serene, sitting calmly, her hands crossed gently in her lap. "But here, it's muted, and you're safe. Is that what you want, Shepard? Safety?"
Shepard looked at her. "I'd rather fight than hide."

Morinth spoke quickly. "Yes. Better to take control of your fate. I've never understood the fascination with safety. Some of us choose differently." Morinth suddenly stood and moved over to Shepard, sitting on her lap and running a finger along the commander's jaw. "Independence over submission. I think we share that, you and I."

Shepard's voice was low, menacing. "You compare us, but you're nowhere near my league."

Morinth smiled. "So strong. I need this." She slid off Shepard's lap and sat beside her, throwing an arm across the back of the couch behind her. She leaned into Shepard as she continued to speak, closing her eyes briefly. When she reopened them, they were black with the desire for a meld. "Look into my eyes and tell me you want me. Tell me you'd kill for me. Anything I want."

Shepard growled, "Don't count on it."

Morinth refocused and tried to push. "But you..." Shepard fixed a picture of Liara's face firmly in her mind and pushed back against Morinth's unsuccessful attempt.

The Ardat-Yakshi's eyes suddenly dropped back to their normal color and Morinth looked at her in surprise. "You already have an Asari lover? So why...?"

Realization dawned and Morinth started to stand as the door of her apartment slid open. "Oh, no... I see what's going on. The bitch herself found a little helper."

Samara stepped into full view, aglow with biotics and confronted her daughter, "Morinth!" as she launched the Ardat-Yakshi away from the commander and smashed her into the window, holding her there momentarily. But Morinth was strong, as powerful as Samara was and Morinth was able to match her, blow for blow. After trashing much of the apartment, the two Asari finally locked one another in a stalemate.

Morinth called to Shepard and asked for assistance. "I am as strong as she is! Let me join you!"

Samara calmly stated, "I am already sworn to you, Shepard. Let us finish this."

To Shepard, there was no choice; she had already confirmed Samara as one of her crew and she would never abandon a crewmate, no matter their philosophical differences. She calmly pulled her biotics and blasted Morinth with a warp to an unprotected side. Shepard had to give Morinth credit, she held her own against the Justicar and even with Shepard's warp throwing her across the room, she was still coherent enough to grind out, "and they call me a monster!"

Samara quickly closed the distance and grabbed Morinth by the neck. With eight more words, the fight was over. "Find peace in the embrace of the Goddess."

Shepard could only stand and watch as Samara killed her eldest daughter. The Justicar spoke quietly, without turning to face the commander. "I am ready to leave this place and get on with my life."

Shepard felt frozen in place. "Samara..." There were no words for what the Justicar had just been required by her own code to do. Shepard had no idea how to express her sorrow to the Justicar, so she said nothing.

Samara slowly turned to her. "Shepard. Your lack of words speaks volumes. What can either of us say? You just watched me kill the bravest and smartest of my daughters. Perhaps in the future we may speak of it, but for now, show mercy on a broken old warrior and let us leave."
Shepard held her hand out flat and Samara laid hers gently on top. They had their differences, but in that moment nothing mattered but the kinship of sisters-in-arms who had just faced a terrible ordeal together. They returned silently to the Normandy without another word spoken.

When Shepard returned to the CIC, Yeoman Chambers informed her of a message in her inbox marked urgent. When she flipped her mail open and saw the message from Feron, she was immediately torn. She knew it would happen eventually. Liara would see or hear something about a mission that would cause her pain, but Shepard had no idea it would be a mission during which she wasn't even injured that would be the cause of it. She wanted to physically prove to her bondmate she was fine, but couldn't justify a return to Hagalaz at the moment; the Normandy was headed in the opposite direction. Liara would have to be content with a vid-call. Shepard glanced at Chambers. "I'm going to my quarters to make a secure call on my private terminal. Under no circumstances am I to be interrupted until I am finished. Miranda can handle anything that comes up. Understood?"

When she received confirmation, she made her way quickly to the loft.

Liara answered immediately, looking somewhat the worse for wear. She was no longer crying, but her eyes were red and her cheeks puffy. Her voice was full of anguish as she spoke. "Shepard! Thank the Goddess! What were you thinking?"

Shepard wasn't quite sure what to say, so just sought to reassure her bondmate that she was fine. "Blue, I'm fine. Samara had my back and Morinth was never really a threat. She's dead."

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. Liara's eyes flew wide and she shouted angrily at the commander. "Not a threat? She's an Ardat-Yakshi! She's killed thousands! She is one of the most deadly beings in the galaxy! I cannot believe you would risk yourself so casually!"

Shepard was so surprised, she shouted back without intending to. "Hey! There was nothing casual about it!" However unintentional, it had the desired effect and Liara cut off her rant. Shepard stopped and shook herself before she continued at a more reasonable volume. "I'm sorry, Blue. Didn't mean to yell. What you meant to say is that Morinth was deadly. And we knew that...not like we went in there without a plan. You know me better than that. And now, thanks to your timely information, she won't kill again."

Liara, visibly deflated, unceremoniously plopped down into a chair, drawing a deep calming breath before speaking. "I'm sorry too, Shepard. That was my frustration speaking. You know I trust you, but when I watched you walk into that room, Samara nowhere to be seen and me being completely unable to aid you... It terrified me. Just like thoughts of losing you, Ardat-Yakshi are the things of nightmares! How can you honestly say she wasn't a threat?"

Samantha smiled softly at her bondmate and practically whispered, "Because I have you." At Liara's puzzled expression, she explained. "When I needed to fool Morinth into thinking she was getting to me, I thought of kissing your sweet lips. Even under such dire circumstances, you centered me and brought me a serenity that made me smile. When she tried to force a meld, I shielded myself as you taught me and then shoved a mental picture of you into her face. It so surprised her, she broke off her attempt...and all Samara needed was that second of distraction to intervene. That was the plan all along, to let Morinth take the bait to the point where she was committed enough to not be thinking of escape...to give Samara the chance to actually catch her before she could slip away yet again. In four hundred years, Samara has gotten close only six times...and each time Morinth managed to elude her. We couldn't let that happen again, and we were out of options. I'm sorry I worried you, Siame, but me knowing the strength of your love was the only shield I needed."

The expression on Liara's face was mixed. She looked sorrowful, her eyes partially closed due to the
irritation from crying, yet the edges of her lips hinted at curving up into a loving smile. "I can't help but worry about you; I love you, Samantha Shepard." Liara reached out and placed her hand on the screen and Shepard was quick to follow, so their hands 'touched.'

Something on Liara's extended arm caught the commander's attention and provided a great chance for Shepard to change the subject. "Hey. Nice promise bracelet." She watched the expression on Liara's face brighten considerably. "You know... mine burned up at Alchera. Once everyone gets there and you have people to run errands, do you suppose you could see your way clear to take yours off for a while and send it back to Illium...to have a new matching mate made? I miss wearing mine."

Liara's eyes lit up. "Absolutely... and I believe everyone is already here, unless you've sent more than two ships and nine commandos. The ships are being retrofitted as we speak. But for the bracelets, they are made as matched pairs, so I'll need to get a whole new set made." With a brief pause, her smile turned to a smirk. "Though you must realize that wearing one again may interfere with getting random Asari to dance with you." Liara cocked her head and raised a brow marking in silent query.

Shepard laughed. "Oh. Saw that too, did you? I was horrible, wasn't I?"

Liara blushed, which Shepard couldn't see across the vid, but could tell by the way Liara hung her head that she was embarrassed. "Yes, I saw... and I am loath to admit it still made me jealous. Such feelings normally indicate distrust, but nothing could be farther from the truth. I just wished I was there with you." Liara's head came back up and she had an honest full smile on her face. She dropped her hand from the screen as if physically releasing the commander as she spoke her last words. "Thank you for calling, Shepard, but I need to let you go... and I need to get back to work. Please be careful, Siame, and come back to me safe."
After finishing her conversation with Liara, Shepard headed back to the CIC to speak with Miranda about where to go next. "Shepard. Glad you're here. I had Joker lay in a course to Haestrom out in the Dholen System of the Far Rim."

Shepard stopped short and looked at her XO in surprise. "Oookay. Do I get to know why?"

Miranda smirked at the look on Shepard's face. "Of course, Commander. I know you planned on heading up to Rosetta to help Jacob, but I got new information from the Illusive Man on the location of Tali'Zorah vas Neema. She was leading some sort of scientific expedition when they were attacked by Geth. She's in trouble, Shepard, and given your history, I assumed you'd want to make all haste and ride to her rescue."

"Shit!" Shepard stared at the galaxy map. "How long?"

"We'll pass through Phoenix Massing, the Far Rim relay is in the Dholen system, and Haestrom is the closest planet to the relay..." Miranda did not get to finish before Shepard cut her off.

Shepard was impatient and growled at the operative. "Damn it, Miranda! How long?" Her concern and irritation reverberated through her tone.

Miranda's eyes flew open wide when she realized she was being the thorough Cerberus scientist instead of the friend Shepard needed right now. "We'll be there within a few hours. I'm sorry, Shepard. Should have said that straight up." After a brief pause, she placed her hand on the commander's shoulder. "Tali's resourceful, Shepard. We'll get there in time."

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Haestrom was not a friendly place. Its sun was preparing to go nova, so the energy pouring off it was burning through the atmosphere and causing a severe radiation hazard. Edi informed them it would cut through their shields in no time, so the team needed to stick to the shade as much as possible. Shepard was starting to work very well with Miranda, so took her along despite the fact they were going to be in contact with the Quarians again. On a mission, skill had to supersede personal differences and Miranda could pack a pretty powerful overload... not to mention they worked well together when tag-teaming their biotics. She also brought Garrus because he was a hell of a sniper, and because it was Tali. She knew the tough Turian had a soft spot for the little Quarian machinist.

When they landed, there was significant Geth activity and no sign of any Quarians. The team worked their way across the compound as best they could by staying in the shade, but still had to cross a few spots where they were exposed to full sun. It didn't take much time before their environmental hazard alarms started buzzing irritatingly in their ears. They'd have to be extremely careful; they had to make sure they didn't get caught out in the open and pinned down by a firefight with the Geth. If the Geth didn't kill them, the radiation would. They finally came to a doorway and had a chance to move inside, at least for a short while to let their shields recover. Shepard found a
dead Quarian marine and his log. The last entry indicated he'd stayed back to buy the rest of the unit
time to get to a location secure from the Geth. Tali was apparently collecting data worth dying for.
Shepard hoped the marine's sacrifice was worth it and they would find Tali still alive and well. The
marine had gone down fighting; a Geth Juggernaut and a couple of troopers were now nothing but
scrap metal.

As they passed through the Quarian's defensive position, a dropship quickly deposited four Geth
troopers in their path. The overloads started flying, quickly followed by the bark of a sniper rifle and
Shepard's 'crash and blast' as the team moved forward quickly. Two more Geth were guarding an
entrance to another covered passage, but they were easily eliminated as well. Shepard sat in the
shaded entry and waited for Miranda and Garrus to catch up, ensuring their shields were fully
functional before pressing forward. Utilizing the same coordinated tactics, the team continued to
advance at a steady pace. Finally, they came around a corner and found two Geth engaged in a
firefight...the first evidence that at least a few Quarians were still fighting. With the team coming up
behind them, the two remaining Geth fell quickly, but not fast enough. As Shepard ran up to the
Quarian marine, he pushed his radio at her as he took his last painful breaths.

The radio was squawking as she picked it up. "Break-break-break. OP-1, this is Squad Leader
Kal'Reegar. Do you copy?" Even though he received no reply, he pressed on. "The Geth sent a
dropship towards OP-2. Tali'Zorah's secure, but we need backup. We're bunkered up here. Can you
send support?"

Shepard grabbed the radio and replied to the squad leader. "This is Commander Shepard of the
Normandy. We passed a lot of dead bodies on the way in, Geth and Quarian alike, and got here just
a few seconds too late to save your last man. I'm afraid there are no survivors. You're the first live
Quarian I've heard since we got here."

Kal'Reegar started out cussing, but then recognition and surprise took over. "Damn.... Wait....
Shepard? As in the Spectre Tali worked with? Don't know why you're here, but right now, any
organic is a welcome addition! Patch your radios into 617 Theta and we can speak secure." He
paused and waited for Shepard to come online on the secure channel. "We're on a stealth mission...
We found what we were after, but then the Geth found us before we got back to our ship."

Shepard glanced around her team and each nodded. They were all connected. "Ok. I'm here with a
squad, we'll get you out. What's your status?"

Reegar growled, "They've got us pinned down. Can't get to our ship, can't transmit the data through
the solar radiation. We were a small squad; a dozen marines and a small science team. Marines are
down to half-strength and Tali's the only science team member left. Made the synthetic bastards pay
for it though."

"Ok." Shepard knew they didn't have many options. "We'll close on them from the rear; hope to
catch them in a cross-fire. What's your location?"

"We're bunkered down at the base camp across the valley. I left Tali at a secure shelter, then doubled
back to hold the chokepoint." Reegar paused only briefly before laying his life on the line. "Getting
Tali out safely is our top priority. If you can extract her, we'll keep them off you."

"Not gonna sacrifice you if we don't have to. Just hold your position. We'll hit their back ranks and
take the pressure off." Shepard signed off and the team was back on the move. As they broke out of
cover, a dropship zoomed into view and Shepard thought for sure the remaining few marines were
going to get overrun. Instead, the dropship launched two missiles and took out the three marines
guarding the doorway into the bunker. It also dislodged a large pillar which fell over, blocking the
entrance.
Shepard pulled her team up and swore into the radio. "Shit! Reegar! The explosion blocked the doorway. Any other way into where you are?"

"That's a negative, Ma'am. We brought demo charges, though. They'll be in the buildings behind you on the other side of the courtyard. You should be able to use them to clear a path." Reegar sounded tired.

"Alright. Hang tough. We'll be back as soon as we can!" Shepard shook her head. Time was running out. If they didn't hurry, the Geth would be dropping a lot more reinforcements on their heads.

Garrus pointed across to the other side. "He must mean those, but I see Geth over there so we'll be fighting our way in. For once we don't get to blow up the explosives to kill the Geth... we actually have to kill the Geth like normal people."

As they started the fight to get into the explosive storage area, Reegar's voice came over the radio one more time. "They're coming in through the side! I've got to fall back!"

Getting to the demolition charges was no easy matter. The Geth had set up shop in the underground storage areas and there were lots of them. Fortunately there was plenty of cover so the team could stay hidden, but time was the critical element. Shepard didn't know how many layers of fall-back positions Reegar had, and if he ran out before they got back to him, they might be too late to save Tali. To Shepard, that was an unacceptable outcome. Because of that, she took an inordinate risk. She treated it like Elysium; she reloaded her shotgun and charged, plowing into a Geth that was standing in the middle of a group of four. Garrus cursed and fired his sniper as fast as it would cycle and Miranda threw warps and slams to scatter the enemy, rather than overloading their shields one at a time. Shepard repeated the maneuver twice more and was in the thick of it, so Miranda didn't have the luxury of taking out one Geth at a time. When the dust settled, they managed to find one completely assembled demolition charge, complete with a detonator, but Miranda was livid.

"Shepard! What the hell did you think you were doing? Saving Tali won't mean anything if you go and get yourself killed!"

Shepard glared at her. "Tali doesn't have time, Miranda! We've got to get this done!"

Miranda glared right back, stepping right up to Shepard's face. "Yes, we do, but we also have to survive it! Get medigel on those wounds. You're not moving until they're all taken care of!"

Shepard sneered, "The hell I'm not. They're not bad; they'll wait until Tali's safe!"

Garrus actually reached in and grabbed a hold of Shepard's shoulder. "No, Shepard, they won't." He actually chuckled. "Never thought in a million years you'd hear me say this, but Miranda's right."

Shepard froze in surprise. "What did you just say?"

Garrus shook his head. "I said it once. You won't hear me say it again. Now get your medigel out and get it done so we can go get our Quarian." Surprisingly, Shepard did as she was told.

Even Miranda chuckled. "Now I know how you felt back on Illium. I thought you had just committed suicide by Geth, and I was already trying to figure out how in the hell I was going to tell Liara." Miranda took advantage of the short break to suck down an energy bar and an electrolyte booster drink. She had really stressed her biotics trying to keep up with Shepard.

Shepard winced as she applied the medigel and swore at herself, wondering how she could be so stupid. She loved Tali like a sister, but saving her wasn't worth risking someone having to deliver that news to Liara. She looked at Miranda and Garrus. "Alright, alright. Point made. I've got my
head back on straight. Sorry about that. Now, let's go find us a second demolition charge in that other bunker."

The second bunker was just as bad, but Shepard slowed her pace back to the original tactics they used when they had first arrived. It was a bit slower progress, but everyone emerged unscathed. When they finally got the charges in place and cleared the entry to the bunker, Shepard realized they still had a ways to go. This was just the research station, and there were no marines and no Tali to be found. Miranda glanced around and her voice was filled with awe as she spoke. "These buildings are Quarian! This colony predates the Geth uprising."

Garrus looked at her, "But why would the Quarians come here? Whatever they're after, I hope it's worth it."

Miranda shrugged her shoulders, "Tali's logs said it had something to do with the sun dying too quickly. If the Geth have figured out some way to blow up our suns..." Her voice just faded out, not wanting to consider the implications of her own statement.

Shepard found and activated a journal and Tali's voice filled the room. "Our ancestors walked these halls with uncovered heads. The sun must have been normal back then. So much space. Walls of stone... It's amazing. I wish my friends could see it. I wish Shepard were here."

Shepard smiled at that, thinking how happy Tali would be when they found her. Suddenly Tali's voice rang out again, but it wasn't a recording... it was coming from a live comm feed. "Tali'Zorah to base camp. Come in, base camp."

"Thank the Gods!" Shepard dove for the comm unit, happy to hear the voice of her little sister, certainly alive and hopefully well. Tali continued speaking. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

Shepard triggered the communicator. "Tali? It's Shepard. Sorry, everyone here is dead. Any survivors must have fallen back."

The surprise in Tali's voice was evident. "Shepard? What are you doing in the middle of Geth space? Not that I'm going to complain! It's good to see you!"

"I was in the neighborhood. Thought you could use a hand." Shepard's smile was strained, given the circumstances, but it was there.

"We knew this mission was high risk. Damn it." Tali nodded. "Thanks for coming, Shepard. It means a lot to know you're here to help. Kal'Reegar and what's left of the marines got me into the observatory. From where you are, it's through the door and across the field. I'm safe for now, but there's a lot of Geth outside."

"Yeah, I talked to Reegar. We're patched in to his secure comms. Last time we talked, there were only three of them left." Shepard glanced at Miranda and the operative shook her head, indicating she couldn't hack the door. Shepard turned back to Tali. "It looks like somebody sealed the door against the Geth and the console here is damaged. Can you get it open from your end?"

Tali looked down at her console, speaking as she worked. "Just a minute... I should be able to... Yes! I can do it. There. Should be unlocked now."

Shepard glanced over and saw the indicator go green. "That's it, Tali. Hold on. We're on our way!"

Tali's voice turned pleading. "Be careful, Shepard, and please do what you can to keep Reegar alive."
"Will do, Tali. See you soon." As Shepard approached, Miranda keyed the door and the team moved out quickly, down a set of steps and out into a courtyard. They were immediately set upon by attack drones. Shepard and Miranda quickly warped the first set and Shepard traded out her shotgun for her pistol. Garrus hung back and picked the drones off one at a time from a sheltered position with his sniper rifle. He eventually had to come out once the first fleet was destroyed and the team had to move forward. Shepard immediately caught sight of another group flying in, accompanied by what appeared to be a Geth prime. Shepard immediately shouted out, "I want a double-overload on that Prime. Should make killing the drones a hell of a lot easier!"

As her teammates complied, she quickly dropped the Prime with a couple of headshots. The drones did drop quicker after that, their attack lacking its previous coordination. They ran into a second Prime with its own supply of drones, so repeated their tactics with just as much success and advanced quickly to yet another bunker door. They entered a small control room that had blast shields on the windows and when Shepard hit the control, every person on the team said their preferred curses under their breath. There was a field full of Geth and at the far end was something Shepard wished didn't exist. Miranda was amazingly calm as she spoke, "Colossus."

They all dove for cover as the monstrosity fired its mass accelerator cannon at them, the shot coming perfectly through the window and turning the wall behind them into a pile of rubble. They quickly moved out the side door and out of its line-of-sight. Once they were clear, Garrus chuckled, "Definitely like old times, Shepard."

Shepard grinned. "I don't ever remember fighting a Colossus on foot, Garrus. An Armature maybe, but not one of those things!"


As they rolled out the side door, Shepard heard a familiar voice, no longer distorted by the radio. "Over here! Get to cover!" It was Kal'Reegar, Quarian Marines.

"Nice to meet you in person, Reegar. Glad to see you alive and kicking!" Shepard glanced around and sadly realized Kal was alone.

"Still don't know why you're here, but this ain't the time to be picky. Tali's inside over there. They killed the rest of my squad, and they're trying to get to her. Best I've been able to do is draw their attention."

Shepard shook her head. "Sorry to hear about your squad, but we'll get it done."

Reegar acted like he didn't even hear her and continued with his situation update. "The Colossus is the worst part. It's got a repair protocol. Every time we got close to killing it, it huddled up and fixed itself. I can't get close enough to get a clear shot when it's down. When I tried, all I got was a hole punched through my suit."

Shepard's head snapped over and she looked directly at Reegar's face-plate. "How bad is the suit rupture?"

Reegar nodded in appreciation, realizing Shepard understood the threat. "Combat seals clamped down and isolated the contamination, and I'm swimming in antibiotics. The Geth might kill me, but I'm not gonna die from an infection in the middle of a battle! That'd just be insulting."

"Alright. Good." Knowing Reegar was safe, Shepard was back on task. "We need to get to Tali. Any ideas?"
"I'm not moving so well, but I can still pull a trigger... and I've got a rocket launcher the sun hasn't fried yet. If you can move in close, I can keep the Colossus busy; maybe even drop its shields. With luck, you'll be able to finish it off." It was obvious Reegar was still willing to sacrifice himself for Tali's safety.

Shepard looked at him earnestly. "I promised Tali I'd keep you alive, so we'll work in pairs. You and Garrus will stay back and provide cover fire. Watch over one another and don't get yourselves killed. Miranda and I will work our way across the catwalk on the right. It will keep us above the troops down on the field and your job is to keep them from climbing up after us. We'll handle anything that comes across the catwalk at us." She looked at Garrus and Miranda and got nods of agreement from both of them. Looking back at Kal, she laid out the rest of the plan. "Once we get over there, your job is to focus on the Colossus and at least draw its fire. If you can help us drop its shields, too, we'd appreciate it. We'll be close enough then to keep it from slipping into repair mode. If it tries, we'll destroy it where it sits."

"Alright, Shepard. Sounds like a plan. They killed my whole damn squad; hit 'em hard for me and we'll keep your back clear. Keelah se'lai!"

The plan worked like a champ. Between Reegar's assault rifle and Garrus sniping anything that stuck its head out, Miranda and Shepard were able to make steady progress across the catwalk. When a particularly large group of Geth headed their way, Shepard threw out a lift and signaled Miranda to warp it. When she eagerly complied, the resultant biotic explosion killed the lifted Geth and four of his buddies, leaving only the Prime at the back of the group. Garrus' sniper rifle barked and put a huge dent in its shields and Miranda almost finished it off with her pistol. At that point, Shepard pulled her biotics and charged in, killing the Prime with the impact and throwing it to the back wall. Shepard now had both cover and an angle on the Colossus. As soon as Miranda caught up and got situated in her own cover, Shepard was on the comms. "Alright guys, we're ready. Light that bastard up!"

Shepard peeked around and unloaded her shotgun on the Colossus. Realizing they were so close, the monstrosity turned away from Kal and Garrus to face the more imminent threat. As soon as it did, Garrus and Kal let loose, including with the rocket launcher. Strong shields or not, it was just a matter of time for the Colossus. Shepard and Miranda continued to toss warps and fired often enough to convince the machine they were still the primary threat, leaving the support team free to fire away with their more powerful weapons. Kal was eager to collect revenge and made every shot count, and Garrus shot as true as he always did. When the Colossus exploded, the whole team heard Kal's shout of victory over the comm.

Once the Colossus was down, cleaning up the rest of the Geth units was child's play by comparison. When the last Geth fell, Shepard tripped her comm back to the unsecure channel. "Tali. Can you hear me?"

"Keelah, Shepard! You're alive! I heard it get quiet and could only hope when no one was answering my calls!"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. We flipped over to a secure channel. Probably should have told you that." Shepard laughed in relief at the sound of Tali's voice. "We're good out here, can you let us in?"

Tali responded immediately. "Just a second. I locked the doors to keep more Geth from getting inside. There, that should do it." The door opened so Shepard and Miranda could step inside. Tali didn't even glance up as she spoke, "Just let me finish this download."

Shepard walked around a bit, checking out the observatory that had kept Tali safe. As she approached the Quarian, Tali started speaking again. "Thank you, Shepard. If not for you, I would
never have made it out of this room. This whole mission has been a disaster. I wish I'd joined you back on Freedom's Progress, but I couldn't let anyone take my place on something this risky." Tali turned from the terminal as she finished the download and stepped toward Shepard, who immediately reciprocated and they shared a quick hug.

Shepard stepped back. "Glad I could get here on time. You owe that to Miranda." Tali's head turned toward the Cerberus operative, but she said nothing, and the commander couldn't judge Tali's expression through her darkened facemask. Shepard continued, "A lot of Quarians lost their lives here. Was it worth it?" As she finished speaking, she heard the door sliding open behind her.

Tali looked down at the floor. "I don't know, Shepard, but it wasn't my call." Her head came back up to face the commander. "The Admiralty Board believed the information here was worth sacrificing all our lives for. I have to believe they know what's best."

Shepard didn't let her off that easy. "I didn't ask what some admiral thought. I want to know what you think."

Tali almost growled. Maybe for her it was a growl; Shepard had never heard Tali truly angry. "A lot of people died here. Some of them were my friends... one was more. All of them were good at their jobs. That damn data better be worth it. The price was too high."

Shepard shook her head in disgust, completely unimpressed by the Admiralty Board's judgment. "What exactly were you looking for?"

Tali raised her omnitool and started pushing buttons. "Haestrom's sun is destabilizing. Back when this was a Quarian colony, it was a normal star. It shouldn't change that quickly. If I had to guess at the cause, I'd say it was being affected by dark energy. It's similar to when an aging star blows off mass to enter the red giant phase, but Dholen is far too young for this to be natural."

Thinking back to what Miranda had said earlier, Shepard reiterated it. "I hope the Geth or the Reapers haven't figure out some way to trigger that on purpose... Anyway. Whatever the reason, I'm glad we got here in time to help. Once you deliver that data, we could use you on the Normandy."

"I promised to see this mission through. I did." Tali sighed sadly. "I can leave with you and transmit the data to the Fleet. If the admirals have a problem with that, they can go to hell. I just watched the rest of my team die." Tali threw her hands up in disgust and anger.

"Maybe not the whole rest of your team, Ma'am." Kal hobbled in slowly, holding his injured side. As he spoke, Tali's head snapped around and zeroed in on the source of the voice.

The Quarian's voice squeaked with happiness. "Kal! You made it!" Shepard's eyes went wide with surprise as Tali practically skipped down the ramp to Reegar and wrapped him in a tight hug.

Reegar cleared his throat uncomfortably and pushed Tali away. "Your old captain's as good as you said. Damn Colossus never stood a chance." Tali was having none of the pushing, and grasped Kal's hand to stay close.

Shepard saw the death grip take hold and she looked at Kal. "If you want, the Normandy can provide you transportation, Reegar..."

He shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but no. I've got to return our ship to the Fleet. It's too precious to leave behind. As long as we get out of here before reinforcements show up, we'll be fine."

Tali turned back to Kal and squeezed his hand again before dropping it. "Actually, Kal, I won't be
going with you. I'm joining Commander Shepard on the Normandy. I started this fight with her and I promised her then I'd follow it through to the end. Now that this mission is complete, the Normandy is where I'm supposed to be."

Being a good marine, Kal stood tall and squared his shoulders. "Understood, Ma'am. I'll pass the data to the Admiralty Board and let them know what happened." He couldn't stand it and his posture relaxed, his hand going back to Tali. He then looked at the commander. "She's all yours now, Shepard. You keep her safe."

Shepard nodded. "I will, Reegar. To the best of my ability." She paused for a moment before asking about their other teammate, who was sure to be disappointed by the obvious relationship between Tali and Kal'Reegar. "By the way, where's Garrus?"

Tali first gasped, and then managed to squeak out, "Garrus is with you?"

Kal chuckled lightly. "Oh, he's out there scrounging around, collecting ammo and supplies. We were talking while we were taking pot shots at the Geth and I mentioned something about Tali and I." Reegar's good humor tapered off as he glanced at Tali and his tone became serious. "I think for some reason it surprised him. And made him a bit uncomfortable. I think he's trying to avoid a public... display."

Tali looked at him. "You Bosh'tet! Were you going to say anything, or were you going to let me walk into that blind?"

Reegar just shook his head and squeezed Tali's hand yet again. "What do you think I'm doing? I wouldn't do that to you, Tali."

Shepard regarded the pair before her. "Tali. This isn't going to be a problem, is it?"

Tali shrugged her shoulders. "I hope not. I'll make the time to talk to Garrus. We're both adults. We'll be fine."

Shepard looked at Reegar. "If Tali told you about me, she probably also told you I can be pretty protective of my crew. Tali's like a sister to me and I'll bring her back to you safe, but so help me, Reegar. You ever hurt her... you're a dead Quarian walking." There wasn't even the slightest hint of jest in the commander's statement.

Miranda's head snapped around and she stared at the commander in surprise, while Tali did the same but also exclaimed, "Shepard!"

Reegar took it in stride, looking at it from a soldier-to-soldier perspective. "I'd never expect anything less, Spectre. And you've got nothing to worry about." His glance shifted to Tali. "You be careful out there, Tali'Zorah vas Neema. Don't make your captain's job of protection any more difficult than necessary."

Tali released the hand she was holding. "You too, Kal'Reegar. Stay safe and keep in touch."

Back on the Normandy, the team converged in the conference room for the debrief. Jacob was waiting and greeted Tali. "Cerberus saw footage of you in action, Tali'Zorah. We're looking forward to having you on the team. Your engineering expertise will really benefit the mission."

Tali's posture was stiff and she paced like a caged animal. Shepard was not surprised, given the Migrant Fleet's experience with Cerberus. Tali's voice was cold and biting. "I don't know who you
are, but Cerberus threatened the security of the Migrant Fleet. Don't make nice."

Shepard nodded at her newest teammate. "You don't have to like them, Tali, but we're on the same side this time."

Tali's head turned quickly to Shepard in apparent surprise. "I assumed you were undercover. Maybe even planning to blow Cerberus up. If that's the case, I'll give you all my grenades. Otherwise..." Tali paused and looked into Shepard's eyes, remaining silent for what seemed like forever before finally continuing with a quick nod after Shepard held her gaze, rock steady. "I'm here for you, Shepard. Not them."

Shepard placed a hand gently on the Quarian's shoulder, never breaking eye contact. "That's exactly what I'm asking for, Tali."

Shepard saw the flash of recognition in the glow of Tali's eyes, even through the darkened faceplate and her tone lightened as she responded, "Right. I'll be in engineering if you need me."

Shepard smiled. "You'll like your crew, Tali. Gabby and Ken are ex-Alliance. Doc Chakwas is also onboard in the med bay, Joker's in the cockpit, and of course Garrus is in the weapons battery. You have friends other than me here."

Tali turned with a gentle laugh. "Good to know, Shepard. Glad Karin is here... someone to complain about the captain to, who will understand."

Jacob completely ruined the mood by jumping back into the conversation. "Don't forget to introduce yourself to Edi, the ship's artificial intelligence."

Tali said nothing to him, just glared and then walked out of the room.

The Normandy was back on course to the Rosetta Nebula for Jacob, but because of the detour to grab Tali from the claws of the Geth, it was now a three-relay hop and would take a couple of days. In the meantime, Shepard went up to her quarters and pulled out Mordin's burst transmitter. She hadn't checked her messages since just after Zorya so she wasn't surprised when it beeped a few times. She had repeat notes from her mom, Culver and Anderson; all wondering why they hadn't heard back and asking if everything was ok. She also had a very short note from Liara, and she wasn't happy...

Aratoht? Batarian space? Reaper's imminent? Too much info. Must talk IN PERSON. SOON!

Things were piling up and Shepard cringed. Between telling her about the Omega-4 Relay, agreeing to be bait for an Ardat-Yakshi, and now planning a prison break in Batarian space, Liara had every reason to be frustrated and irritated with her. Shepard sighed and typed a quick response that would hopefully mollify her.

Won't go to Aratoht w/o seeing you in person 1st. Promise. I'll see you soon as I can get there. By the way, scooped Tali off Haestrom. She's on Normandy w/me. Love you! Keep the faith.

Shepard then typed up a quick update and hello for her distribution list before firing up the transmitter one more time. Afterward, she checked her regular message terminal. There wasn't really that much of substance there, but there was a message from the Migrant Fleet. Tali probably got the same message, but Shepard used it as an excuse to head down to Engineering and see how the Quarian Machinist was settling in. Ken and Gabby greeted her as she walked in and Tali turned to face her as the commander walked up. "Shepard! What can I do for you?"
"Hey, Tali. Just checking in. I got a message from Admiral Rael'Zorah approving your transfer request to the Normandy. You're important to them... everyone's telling me to keep you safe, or else." Shepard smirked as she continued. "They do realize this is listed as a suicide mission, right?"

Tali laughed. "Yes, but they also know what you did at Elysium, that you talked Saren out of killing you and into his own suicide instead, and that you successfully stole the Normandy to save the galaxy from Sovereign. They know a bunch of Collectors and the Omega-4 Relay won't even present a challenge."

"Gah! Please. I wasn't alone for any of that. That's why I need you here. To watch my back and keep me from doing anything stupid." Shepard smiled at her friend, extremely glad to have her back.

Tali nodded. "Yes. And I'm working on that already. I'm looking at the ship specifications and, with the right materials, I can easily fortify the shields. Ok, maybe not easily, but it can certainly be done." She glanced down at the floor, her thoughts going back to a not so pleasant time in their past. "The Collectors cut through the original Normandy's barriers like they didn't even exist last time. My upgrades will give us a better chance. I developed it after I returned to the Fleet and it shouldn't be too difficult to modify for the Normandy. It's a completely new concept called Cyclonic Barrier Technology. It's based on rapidly oscillating..." Tali stopped when Shepard held her hand up and shook her head.

"Stop. I'm not a techie and you're already over my head." She laughed. "I don't want to interrupt your work, but I would like to catch up. We couldn't talk on Freedom's Progress and we certainly didn't have time while dodging Geth on Haestrom. Seems a lot has changed for you."

Tali glanced over at the engineer station to Gabby and Ken and waved Shepard back to the drive core. "I know you said they are prior Alliance, but I still don't trust anyone I don't know. It's a Fleet thing."

"Don't worry about it, Tali." They reached the core and Shepard leaned against the railing. "So how about you? You doing ok?"

Tali looked at her and hung her head. "I can't believe so many people died." Her head came back up and she reached out and gripped Shepard's hand. "Thank you again for getting Reegar out alive. I don't know what I'd do without him."

Shepard had a gentle smile on her face. "I can tell he's important to you. Glad I could help."

"Shepard. When you disappeared and we thought... I thought... you were gone, I was broken. I ran back to the Fleet because I couldn't stand being around the crew without you. It hurt too much." Shepard looked at the floor and squeezed her eyes closed to keep tears from escaping, knowing how much her supposed death had impacted so many. Tali continued on. "Kal was a good friend and he helped me through it. He brought the soldier's perspective that I still lacked, even after my time on the Normandy. Liara was fixated on finding you and wanted us to go with her, and while Garrus did, I just couldn't. She was so very angry, Shepard. They both were."

Shepard interrupted Tali at that point and gave her a quick synopsis of everything that had happened between her and Liara. "She's different now, Tali. Tougher, stronger. But the old Liara is still there as well. We're amazingly good. Even better than before. I'm glad you found Kal to fill that need for you." Shepard hesitated, but had to ask. "Have you talked to Garrus yet?"

"Yes, but no. We've chatted, but neither of us has broached the subject. I never even realized he felt that way until Kal told us. I know it was only a couple of years ago, but I was so young and naive then. I even had a hero-worship crush on you, and I don't like women!" They both laughed as Tali
continued. "I've matured a lot since then. I've realized that saving the galaxy isn't all bright shiny stars and glory. It can be a very dark and scary thing."

Shepard grimaced for just a second before a smile came back to her face. "But not quite so scary once you're back among friends you know you can trust."

Tali nodded in agreement. "Yes, but I still miss the old faces though. Charlie Pressly, Engineer Adams, all of them. It doesn't seem right, having Cerberus in charge of this ship. Are you sure working for them is the right thing to do?"

Shepard almost laughed. "I'm not working for them. I'm using their resources and taking their money. Does it look like they're pulling the strings, Tali?" Shepard shook her head. "No, they're working for me, whether they realize it or not... and that's why I have folks like Garrus and you on board. I'd get the whole crew back if I could, but not everyone is as forgiving as you."

Tali looked at her. "It's not a matter of forgiveness, Shepard. It's a matter of trust, and I can see in your eyes you're still you. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here, whether I forgave you or not." Tali leaned forward and gave her a quick hug before stepping back. "I'm sure there's a story behind that though, but save it for another time. I should get back to work and figure out this new drive core. I'll have her optimized in no time."

Shepard laughed as she turned and walked out. "I'm sure you will, Tali. I'm sure you will."
Shepard was anxious. The detour to steal Tali from the brink of 'death by Geth' had cost them days. Not that Shepard would ever begrudge saving Tali; not for a single second. But the message from Liara had highlighted the urgency of Hackett's request. A potential lead on the Reapers... and the question of whether the attack really was imminent was starting to eat at her subconscious, making it hard to sleep. When the info came on Tali, they had only been a day out from Aeia, but going there via Haestrom turned that one day into four. Even once in the nebula, the relay was in the Enoch system and Aeia was in Alpha Draconis, so they had to utilize FTL to get there, then travel two thirds of the way across the system to get to the planet. By the time they actually got to the Shadow Broker base, it would be a week after receiving Liara's message. When they got close to Aeia, Joker had picked up the wreckage on scanner so the shuttle would be able to set down fairly close. As she got ready to go down to the planet with Jacob, Miranda and Tali, she hoped Tali's save and her promise to help Jacob didn't cost them everything.

On the way to the ground, Shepard stood up and addressed the crew. "Ok, Jacob. You're obviously here because this potentially involves your father. Miranda is here because she and I make a pretty damn good biotic team if things go to hell. Tali's here because of the time delay on the beacon; if they've had a functioning colony for the last ten years, I'm thinking maybe some critical piece of equipment has failed or something. If that's the case, Tali's our best bet at fixing it and getting us gone. I want this done by the numbers and done quick, everyone putting old grudges aside. Any questions?"

The commander didn't normally feel the need to justify why certain individuals were selected for the ground team, so she had to feel the apprehension exuding off Tali, being forced to work with Cerberus operatives and an AI. When the shuttle touched down, Shepard had the door open and was hopping out before the others had hardly even gotten out of their seats. Edi came on comm almost immediately. "I have run a scan of the ship and detected no life signs. There may be useful technology or ship's logs still inside."

When they actually saw the ship, they realized it had definitely crashed, but came down mostly intact, so there was a good chance there were survivors. As they got closer Jacob started talking. "Looks like it was stripped after the crash. They'd have tried to get a beacon up as soon as possible."

Shepard shrugged. "I don't know about that. The planet looks pretty friendly. They were out here to colonize. Maybe they figured they'd just make a go of it here. They wouldn't set up a distress beacon in that case. Let's not assume anything until we get more data."

Tali got a console working and a voice emerged, apparently starting in the middle of a recording. They all listened as it spoke of horrible things done to the crew, who were in no condition to understand what was happening. At first, the voice recording made them all think people had been
badly injured in the crash, but then the voice spoke of distracting the victims so they would forget what you did to them before the bruises showed. From what the man on the recording was saying, it left a distinct impression that the healthy, strong survivors took advantage of the weaker or ill ones. From the mention of bruises showing, Shepard got the uncomfortable feeling that it went beyond just taking advantage to outright physical abuse; the strong had victimized the weak. With a deepening frown on her face, Shepard glanced at Jacob and realized he bore the same disgusted expression as she did. They proceeded into the ship to see how many of the logs they could reconstruct, to see if they could put together a more complete picture. There weren't many functional devices, but those that did work didn't tell a good story.

Jacob's father had been bumped up from First Officer to Captain when the original captain was killed in the crash, and people didn't like it. They talked about Jacob's father not commanding the same level of respect. The Normandy crew all realized in situations like this, not respecting your leadership could cause serious problems. The medical logs of the doctor were even worse. There wasn't anything in particular mentioned, but it seemed like their doctor had suffered some sort of head injury and she was operating at a diminished mental capacity. A decent doctor was essential to colonization protocols, especially in an unknown environment. The ship didn't give up any more secrets, so they headed back out and started down a path along the shore. They soon found the emergency beacon that had started transmitting, and without the atmospheric distortion they could actually make out the message; it explained everything.

Repeat: Toxicology Alert: Danger of rapid neural decay. Local flora chemically incompatible with human physiology. Pause in beacon protocol, eight years, 237 days, seven hours. Pause is recorded as: RECORD DELETED by Acting Captain Ronald Taylor, promoted under emergency command protocols. Other flagged issues: Local food and neural decay and unsafe deceleration following unspecified impact and sub-light drive failure.

The beacon was a VI, so Shepard interrupted the repeating message to make queries to the system. She quickly discovered the ship crashed after the drive failure, resulting in significant damage to the ship and several crew injuries. When she asked about the neural decay and thought about the ten years the Hugo Gernsback had been missing, she was shocked. The VI indicated the neural decay began after only seven days of eating any of the local flora... and the effects were cumulative. After such a long period of time, she doubted they would find anyone still alive. She looked at Jacob and shook her head. Jacob spoke before the commander had a chance to say anything. "I know, Commander. Doesn't look good. Let's see if we can find their encampment. Maybe they'll have data logs that detail exactly what happened to everyone. Or at least something to explain the eight-year pause on the emergency beacon transmission. That doesn't happen by itself. Someone had to turn it back on, and the VI said it was done in my father's name. Maybe the neural decay affected him, and maybe it's not permanent or he somehow recovered. I need to know."

Tali, not worrying about sparing any Cerberus feelings was blunt. "That long? He's got it, and if he'd recovered you'd think he would have added it to the beacon message." Jacob had no response.

The group moved out, continuing to follow the trail. Soon enough, they could see crates and equipment stacked in the trail ahead, almost like barricades. As they got close, a woman popped out unexpectedly from behind a stack and she was lucky to not be riddled with bullets. She had obviously been affected by the decay and seemed to be talking nonsense about them coming from the sky because they had been summoned by her leader; it seemed the concepts of spacecraft and emergency beacons were beyond her. Then she said something that concerned the crew. "Some have lost faith. The hunters! They will have seen your star. They will not let you help him."

She went on to explain that the hunters had been cast out, exiled from the main group, and that they hunt the 'machines,' which Shepard interpreted as colonial security mechs and service droids. Before
the woman could say much more, they heard a growl. The team glanced up the trail and a man
ducked down out of their site, looking like he was half wild. His clothes were torn and he was
unshaven; he looked feral. When he popped back up out of hiding, he was aiming a pistol at the
group. Miranda shouted out, "Gun!"

Shepard grabbed the woman and pulled her quickly down behind some crates while everyone dove
for cover. The woman looked at her and exclaimed, "Hunters! They won't stop until the leader is
dead!"

Her words were confirmed as the semi-wild man growled out, "Kill them! Agents of the liar! He will
not escape!"

A small group of wild, untrained colonists couldn't hope to have any chance against the Normandy
crew and soon enough, all five of the hunters were dead. Jacob was greatly disturbed. "I can't believe
my father would let this go on. Something is very wrong."

Shepard looked at him as she answered, "We'll find out soon enough. Let's keep moving."

They occasionally came upon mechs as they moved along the trail. Tali scanned each one as they
passed and finally commented. "Every one of these has been stripped for parts, and none of them are
in very good shape. After ten years of no replacements, they're wearing out. You can only repair
something so many times before it's just plain hopeless."

Shepard was glancing sideways, listening to Tali, when Miranda called out that they were
approaching a settlement. Shepard growled, "They'd better be friendlier than the last group."

Jacob agreed, because he was looking for answers and wanted to talk to them. Miranda, ever the
analyst, made an observation. "Dressed the same as the hunters, but more passive... and all female. I
wonder if the neural decay effects are gender specific?"

Some of the women started to walk up to them, curious, but then Jacob caught up to the group and
started speaking. Almost as one, the women gasped. The one who was closest spoke in surprise,
"You have his face! He promised to call the sky, but he sends nothing! He forced us to eat...to decay.
And you are cursed with his face!"

"That's not exactly a rousing welcome, Jacob. I assume you look like your father, and it looks like
the locals aren't very pleased with him."

Jacob shook his head in disgust. "Yeah. Sounds like he forced them to eat toxic food. What the
hell?"

They tried to get more answers, but once they saw Jacob, the group clammed up and wouldn't speak
to them. In an attempt to get better cooperation, the team scattered and Jacob held back. Of course
Miranda found the doctor of the group and she provided a datapad detailing the progression of the
decay and what the captain and his officers had done. The doctor couldn't even remember how to
read or write anymore, but she knew what she had written was important. It was hard to watch, and
Miranda found herself hoping, for a woman she didn't even know, that the condition was not
permanent. As Miranda read the datapad, she was more and more disgusted. She eventually called
Jacob over and handed him the datapad. The crew of the Gernsback was afraid the beacon was
taking too long to fix and help wouldn't come fast enough, so they restricted ship's rations to the
officers and forced the civilian colonists to eat the toxic food and hope for treatment later. A few
mutinied over the decision, and Jacob's father and the other officers turned the mechs on them. Jacob
was just starting to explain how eventually all the males were either listed as exiled or dead and the
females were divided amongst the officers like pets, or their own private harems. The conversation
was abruptly truncated when Tali suddenly shouted out, "Incoming hostiles!"

Expecting to see more hunters, they were surprised to see mechs coming at them, guns drawn and starting to fire. "Your captain demands obedience. Weapons are forbidden."

Apparently the mechs were programmed to identify anyone even carrying weapons as an enemy. The team took cover and since there were only three mechs, the fight was over almost as soon as it began. Shepard and Jacob returned to their discussion. As Jacob finished reading, it was apparent that his father purposely separated out the men and killed them off. They had to wonder if the hunters were actually exiled, or if they had just escaped the slaughter. Either way, it looked as if Jacob's father did it on purpose, creating his own version of heaven. He activated the beacon as a last resort when the remaining men banded together and came back to hunt him down. Jacob shook his head in disgust. "Ten years! Why didn't he set it right? I need to find this man!"

With that, the team headed off on the path the mechs had emerged from; seemed like as good a direction as any. They moved fairly quickly, bypassed a couple of obstacles and eventually got close enough to the main camp that the captain felt it necessary to contact them over a loudspeaker. He claimed that his crew went insane and that he had just gotten free. He apologized for the mechs, claiming he had to automate them for protection after his crew went crazy. As they continued to battle their way through the mech forces, Ronald Taylor continued to justify his actions. After awhile, Shepard turned to Jacob in irritation, "That is the rambling of a guilty man trying to justify his actions. I wish he'd just shut the hell up."

Even though it was his father, Jacob agreed. He growled in response, "Just throwing people away. This... thing... is not my father."

They fought their way through the last of the mechs and finally came to the main stronghold, where Jacob's father was alone. He welcomed them warmly, claiming he knew a real squad would have no problems reaching him, and apologizing if the 'mechs scuffed their pads.' No one on the team was amused. He could tell by their attitude they weren't happy and tried to sweeten the reception. "I'll get you something nice when we get back to Alliance space. I've got some back pay coming."

Shepard was surprised when Jacob managed to keep the anger out of his voice. "What about your crew, Acting Captain?"

"Total loss." Ronald Taylor's voice didn't reflect the least bit of sympathy. "The toxic food turned them wild. They propped me up here in some kind of ritual behavior. Waiting for a chance to signal has been hell." The man didn't realize they had talked to the crew, heard the logs, read the data records. Shepard wouldn't even look at the man; she just let Jacob talk to him.

Even Jacob had enough and shook his head in disgust. "That's the best you can do?"

That's when Ronald drew Shepard's attention by asking her a direct question. "You let all your people talk back like that? Uh.... Who are you, exactly?"

Shepard spun on him. The man before her didn't deserve her name. "Doesn't matter. You're running a very questionable setup here, Captain. Explain."

Ronald talked about the crash and the aftermath; how no one ever really accepted him as captain, eventually rebelling and trapping them all on the planet. He said they started eating the toxic food, not that he had ordered them to. Claimed it made them wild and made it impossible for him to get to the beacon to activate it. Shepard was going to let him keep going and hang himself; Tali was recording the entire exchange. Finally though, Jacob couldn't stand it anymore. "Just stop! We know what you did to your crew. Why let this go ten years?"
The acting captain turned to him harshly. "Who the hell are you?"

Jacob stepped right up to him and glared, eye to eye as he answered. "Taylor. Lieutenant Jacob Taylor."

That set the man back in surprise and shame. "Jacob? My Jacob?" Jacob just nodded.

Shepard still stood off to the side, hip cocked, arms crossed in disgust as if trying to shield herself from the filth standing before her. Her voice rang with revulsion. "Not who you expected, Captain."

The man looked back over his shoulder at her, finally sounding at least a bit sorrowful. "I was hoping to not have to explain this to him. Or anyone, really. You have to understand. This isn't me. The realities of command, they change you. I wasn't ready for that."

With those words Shepard realized his sorrow was not at what he'd done, but at the fact that he had gotten caught. He continued speaking and Tali continued recording. He looked at Jacob as he finished. "I made sure you were taught right. Before I left. I had hoped to leave it at that."

Shepard couldn't stand it anymore and stood up from her somewhat slouched position. She uncrossed her arms and put a finger in his face. "I'm not biting, Captain. At some point you chose to do this to your crew. You!"

Jacob tagged on, also getting in his face. "What was that moment? I want to know there was an actual reason!"

Shepard signaled to Miranda; they had incoming hunters. The operative pulled her pistol and made sure they saw it, but didn't threaten them with it. Somehow, they still maintained enough intelligence to understand what was going on and didn't come any closer.

The captain tried to explain about the mutiny and the hard line they took to keep order. As the decay set in, they made sure the crew were cared for and everyone seemed happy, for a while. As time went on the effects got worse and people started reacting on an instinctual level and the officers had to establish dominance, like in a dog pack. He shook his head. "After a while, the perks seemed... normal."

Jacob was revolted and he sneered at the man he no longer claimed as father, "That's it? You created a harem and played king? Ten years in a juvenile fantasy?"

The man waived his hand in frustration. "I can't point to where it all went wrong. But when the beacon was ready... revealing what happened didn't seem like a good idea. It seemed best to just disappear off the galactic map. Until the hunters showed up."

Jacob scoffed, "Until you needed someone to save your ass, you mean."

Shepard crossed her arms again. "You don't get to just walk away after all this time."

Jacob pulled his pistol and pointed it at the acting captain. "You're damn right he doesn't. What happened here... I should vent his head... but he's not even worth pulling the trigger."

Shepard agreed. "You're right. But if we leave him here he's a dead man walking. We'll take him into custody and he can sit in the brig. We'll pass all the data to the Alliance and they can arrange for someone to come evacuate these people. The folks over at Caleston Rift can be here in less than a day. Anybody have issues with that?" When no one protested, she got on the comm and made all the arrangements.
When they got back to the Normandy, Jacob took Ronald Taylor to the brig and Shepard asked Miranda to follow her to the loft. Once they got there, she played back the conversation she had with Hackett. Miranda listened to the whole conversation without saying a word. When it was completely finished, she closed her eyes and quietly queried, "When did you get this?"

Shepard answered without hesitation, "Right after Zorya."

Miranda's jaw clenched. "Shepard. What part of imminent Reaper invasion did not seem important to you?"

Shepard bristled. "I'm not an idiot! I immediately sent it to Liara to get information. We can't just ride into Batarian space and say hello! I just got the response from Liara on the way to Aeia."

"And you didn't think to tell me immediately? I would have turned us around in the blink of an eye! And of course you are going, right? That's why you're showing me this?" Miranda took a deep breath and released it slowly to calm herself.

"Yes, but we need to go to Hagalaz first. Liara said there's too much info to transmit, and things she wants to discuss in detail." Shepard tried to look apologetic, but Miranda didn't buy it.

She glared at the commander while she tapped into the comm net. "Joker. Hagalaz. Yesterday."

Joker came back, "Yes, Ma'am. How come the only time we use 'yesterday' speed is when we're going to see Liara?"

Shepard blushed and Miranda looked at Shepard in question, her head cocked and one eyebrow raised. Shepard sighed, "You don't really expect an answer to that, do you?"

The only response they got from Joker was laughter accompanied by a choked, "not exactly."

The Hourglass Nebula was only a two-relay hop from the Rosetta Nebula, so Joker and Edi made Hagalaz in record speed. It also helped that they didn't need stealth capability when they arrived either, since they no longer had to hide from the Shadow Broker. Soon, the key players stood around a planning table on the Broker ship. Liara, of course, was adamant that Shepard take her commandos; there would be no linking them to the Alliance and they would greatly improve Shepard's chances of coming back alive. Of course, it also decreased the chances of a successful quiet infiltration to almost nothing and Kenson would probably end up dead. Shepard finally agreed to take Judea and Sellis Boni, the squad infiltrator, but only as back-up. They would stay on the Normandy and the ship would shadow her, in stealth mode, until she was safely back on board. If anything went wrong, Shepard would send a one-word message to the Normandy, "Seek," and Miranda, Kasumi, Judea and Sellis would conduct an infiltration extraction.

Liara had a wealth of information; schematics, patrol rotations, guard strength, access points, the works. Sellis had even taken the liberty of outlining what she felt were the best ingress and egress routes, so most of the planning was already completed. Kasumi provided Shepard with two upgraded cloaks that were much better than the N7 standard issue, and it was go-time. As the team boarded the shuttle to return to the Normandy, Liara grabbed the commander's hand and spun her back. Liara's throat was constricted with worry, so she didn't say anything, but Shepard could see the concern in her eyes and feel the apprehension flooding through the link. Shepard reached up, cupped her cheek and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. "I will come back to you... I promise." She stroked Liara's cheek
with her thumb as she pulled her hand away. The Asari's eyes were glassy with moisture, but she did not allow any tears to fall. As the shuttle doors closed, she choked out, "I love you, Samantha Shepard!"

Shepard pushed back through the link, *(And I love you, Liara T'Soni.)* Then, she was gone. The Normandy made good time and they were soon in stealth mode over Aratoht. With final comm checks and a micro-tracker swallowed, Shepard disappeared into the stifling heat of the Aratoht night. With the aid of the cloak, the infiltration was actually very easy. Shepard ended up killing only three Batarians, the interrogator and two observers. She quickly provided Kenson with the second cloak and they were already to the shuttle bay before the alarm was even raised. Kenson flew the shuttle out, so did not see Shepard key a preset extraction success message to be sent from her omnitool as they exited the facility. The Normandy picked up the "Phase 2" signal and shadowed the shuttle to its destination.

Once Kenson programmed in the coordinates for her base of operations, she engaged the autopilot and came to speak with Shepard. Kenson admitted to her plan to destroy the mass relay, and that she found a Reaper artifact they had started referring to as Object Rho. It provided proof the Reapers were coming and that they would arrive from dark space via the Bahak System. Kenson frowned and looked hard at the commander. "When they get here, they'll use the Bahak relay to travel throughout the galaxy."

Shepard's heart threatened to stop beating. *The Reapers are coming!* She urged Dr Kenson to continue her story. Kenson complied, and told her of 'the Project'; their plan to put thrusters on a nearby asteroid and smash it into the relay. They weren't even positive it would work, but conventional weapons had no effect on the relays so they had no other options. "Of course, the resulting explosion from a destroyed relay will probably wipe out the entire system. The Batarians took exception to that."

Shepard's jaw refused to work for a moment, but she finally managed to speak. "Shit. I'd take exception to that as well. I'm here on behalf of Admiral Hackett, so before I can let that happen, I'll need to see your proof."

Dr Kenson's eyes lifted to hers. "Steven sent you?"

Shepard was surprised at the somewhat intimate reference by the operative. Hackett must not have been kidding when he said they went way back. Not many were on first name basis with the Admirals of the fleet. "Yes. It was his request I see to this personally."

Kenson nodded. "Well, it's a good thing we're on the way to the Project then. I'll show you everything we have. You'll have no doubts remaining, soon enough."

Kenson seemed earnest as she described the Project, telling the commander the history of everything they discovered and how they were salvaging thruster engine parts to maneuver the asteroid. The project was nearing completion when she had been caught, so if work had continued they should be ready to activate it as soon as Shepard verified the information and utilized her Spectre status to approve the action. Shepard realized the necessity of the act, but the thought of destroying an entire system chilled her to the bone. They arrived at the project hideout, which was actually on the asteroid they planned on pushing, and Kenson was quick to point out a huge clock on the wall. "That's our countdown to Arrival. When that gets to zero... the Reapers will have come."

The clock displayed 02 03 25 20. Shepard puzzled at its significance. She knew it was the wrong answer when she suggested it, watching the last set of numbers ticking away too quickly, but couldn't believe the Reapers would be here so soon...much too soon! "Is that years, months, days, hours?"
Kenson was dead serious when she looked at the clock. "No, Commander. It's exactly what I know you fear. Days, hours, minutes, seconds. Just over two days and counting. Puts things in perspective, doesn't it."

Shepard's eyes snapped to the doctor. "Then show me what you have, Kenson. Quickly."

Shepard couldn't believe it. When they walked into the main lab, the artifact stood in all its glory in the center of the room, glowing and pulsing, and completely unshielded. The object pulsed and Shepard's knees almost buckled as a moving image slammed into her brain, similar to what the Prothean beacon had done to her two years before. This image showed the Reapers emerging from dark space, into the Bahak system, and utilizing the relay to quickly spread throughout the galaxy. Shepard forced the image to the background of her mind and grunted at Kenson through gritted teeth. "This is why you decided to destroy the relay? And the Reapers will be here in less than two days?"

Kenson smiled. "Now you see. Yes. When we started the project, it was to slow their advance. It won't stop them, but they'd have to travel through dark space to the next relay; it would have bought the galaxy months, maybe a whole year to prepare for them. We don't know exactly how fast the Reapers are able to travel."

After she pushed the images to the background, Shepard could function again and nodded in agreement. "Warn the Batarians. Give them a chance to evacuate and then activate the Project. Spectre authorization..."

Before Shepard finished, Kenson drew a pistol on her. "I'm sorry, Shepard. We can't do that."

"What?" The Spectre was confused as to why Kenson would object to warning the Batarians. "I don't care if they find out it was an Alliance project! The explosion will destroy the system and kill hundreds of thousands! Needlessly! We have to ..."

"You don't understand, Shepard! We can't delay the Reapers!" Realization started to dawn on Shepard; it was Saren all over again. She realized that everyone who had spent any prolonged time on the station had been indoctrinated by the unshielded exposure to Object Rho. Kenson continued, "We can't win the fight! So we'll let them come and will ascend to their greatness!"

Shepard was instantly fighting, not only for her life but for the fate of the entire galaxy. Kenson was actually her biggest worry, being a trained Alliance operative, so Shepard moved quickly and targeted her first, taking away her weapon easily while surprise was on her side. She was a Spectre, against scientists, so she definitely had an advantage the numbers didn't necessarily suggest. The rest were just a matter of attrition, but the waves seemed to just keep coming and Kenson took the opportunity to escape. Shepard was sickened when she realized that everyone on the station was indoctrinated and she'd have to kill them all.

Suddenly the gunfire stopped and no one new entered the room. Just as she approached the door to chase down Dr Kenson, Object Rho sent out a powerful pulse that seemed to short-circuit the Spectre's nervous system. Her vision dimmed and her limbs quit working. The last thing she remembered seeing as she collapsed to the floor was Kenson coming back in the door, eyes glowing as if she was possessed by the Collector General. "Take her to the med bay and patch her up. We want Shepard alive."

The commander awoke in the med bay, surprisingly unrestrained. She heard voices in the background discussing her condition and the fact that she should still be sedated, but the monitors indicated she was waking. They didn't believe it was possible, with the amount of drugs they pumped into her system; but they didn't know about her Cerberus upgrades, about how quickly she
processed drugs, alcohol or toxins. It saved her life. She quickly took out the med tech and the two guards and found the locker with her equipment. Above the locker was one of the countdown timers and Shepard wanted to scream. They had managed to keep her sedated for over two days, and the clock reflected less than two hours remaining. She had some work to do, so she wasted no time. She worked her way methodically through the station, the unprofessional staff not really providing much resistance. Eventually she ran into real security, including vanguards and engineers. She still got by them, but it took precious time.

When she located project control, the true impact of what she was going to do hit her hard. The project VI spoke an automated warning. "Activating the Project will result in an estimated three hundred and five thousand casualties. Do you wish to continue?"

Shepard stared at the number projected on the screen. 304942. Her breath came in gasps. She leaned on the console and those numbers were burned permanently into her memory. Three hundred and five thousand sacrificed to save the galaxy. The Batarians should have had time to evacuate! Shepard reached forward and cursed in frustration as she slapped her hand down on the button to start the sequence. The VI spoke again. Project activation in progress. Warning: Collision with mass relay is imminent. Begin evacuation procedures."

Kenson's image popped up on a nearby comm terminal, screaming like a mad woman, promising to destroy the asteroid by causing an eezo core meltdown before it could impact the relay. Shepard cursed again and a new chase began, fighting her way through more troops to beat Kenson to the engine core. When Shepard caught up to her, Kenson glared at her. "I don't care if the Reapers wanted you alive... I should have just killed you! There's no redemption for what you're doing!"

Shepard realized just how far Kenson had fallen under the Reaper's influence as she continued. The doctor hung her head in disappointment. "I will die never having seen the Reapers' blessings!" She turned and gave Shepard one last glare. "But I can still kill you and keep you from stopping them!"

Suddenly Kenson turned fully toward her and revealed a detonator in her hand, the explosives in a bag at her feet. Shepard pulled the trigger on her shotgun a fraction of a second after Kenson pressed down the plunger, the explosion killed Kenson instantly and threw Shepard hard into a wall. She woke to the damn Project VI shouting in her ear. "Warning: Collision imminent" was repeating over and over and red lights were flashing all over the station. If Shepard's body hadn't been enhanced by the Cerberus upgrades, she would have been dead, or at least unconscious for a lot longer, which would have resulted in the exact same ending.

With Kenson gone, what remained of the science team had moved to the shuttle pad and started the evacuation. As Shepard burst out the door, she immediately came under heavy fire, but this time not just from scientists. Coming in with Kenson as a friendly and going out as an enemy Spectre were two different things; she suddenly faced multiple standard security mechs and a single Atlas mech. She could also see the mass relay looming closer; she didn't have much time. Shepard ducked into cover and typed an emergency sequence on her omnitool that automatically transmitted an emergency one-word broadcast to the Normandy that indicated she required an armed extraction. "Fetch."

On the Normandy, Bravo team sprang into action. This was not the back-up infiltration squad. Jacob, Garrus, Zaeed and Grunt, the military heavy hitters, jumped onto the shuttle and homed in on Shepard's personal locator beacon. As Shepard worked her way closer to the landing pad, a huge hololimage of a Reaper appeared in the air above it and started speaking. "Shepard. You have become an annoyance. You fight against inevitability. Dust struggling against cosmic winds. This seems a victory to you. A star system sacrificed. But even now, your greatest civilizations are doomed to fail. Your leaders will beg to serve us."

Shepard glared at the translucent projection in anger. "Yes, people will die. More than I care to
admit, but we will do whatever it takes to rid the galaxy of the Reaper threat. However 'insignificant' we might be, we will fight and we will find a way...or die free, trying!"

The Reaper remained imperious. "Know this as you die in vain. Your time will come. Your species will fall. Prepare yourselves for the Arrival."

Shepard realized the Reapers didn't care if the relay was destroyed. They didn't care about the project. They had lived for hundreds of thousands of years and wiped out entire civilizations. What was one more year? What was a meager three hundred thousand people? To the Reapers, it just didn't matter.

The Reaper finished speaking and the image faded, just as the Normandy shuttle zipped in and four guns came blazing out the door. They provided sufficient cover for Shepard to make her way to the shuttle. Grunt wanted to stay and finish the fight, but Shepard reeled him in. "No time! We've got to get to the Normandy and thru that relay before this asteroid hits it. The whole system's gonna blow!"

The shock on everyone's face was obvious, but Judea was piloting the shuttle and heard Shepard's warning. She wasted no time and they were soon docked on the Normandy with Joker speeding them toward the relay. Shepard scrambled to the CIC and stared at the galaxy map, breathing a sigh of relief when the Normandy indicator popped up in the Arcturus Stream cluster. When the Bahak relay blew, Shepard realized Object Rho had started to worm its way into her mind. Along with the relay explosion, she felt Object Rho's 'death,' along with a significant portion of the 304,942 souls that had come under its sway. She screamed and grabbed her head in an attempt to block out the tidal wave of fear and pain as the outside world went away. Had she managed to keep from passing out, Shepard would have thanked the Gods that she had not been exposed to Object Rho long enough to become indoctrinated. That's why the Reapers wanted her alive; they wanted her on the station and fully indoctrinated. If she had been, she never would have activated the project and the Reapers would be spreading throughout the galaxy, bringing death and destruction with them. Worse yet, the one person who had the greatest chance at stopping the Reapers would have been helping them instead.

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It started as a tiny dot that kept growing larger... apparently it was getting closer. At first it was just a remote light in the dark; the only thing penetrating the seemingly otherwise impenetrable darkness. As it grew closer it gained color and it gave warmth. Not a physical warmth, but an emotional, heartwarming, teal comfort. The overwhelming dark receded as the teal seemed to envelop her being, wrapping her in a welcoming embrace. Shepard was suddenly able to take in a deep breath. She exhaled. {Liara...}

Her eyes opened to see a beautiful blue face staring down at her, evidence of strain readily apparent and tears of relief slipping down her cheeks. The eyes closed and the lips moved soundlessly, but Shepard heard the silent prayer through the link. {Thank the Goddess.} Liara slumped back into her chair, obviously exhausted.

Shepard rasped out through a painfully raw throat, "How long?"

Dr Chakwas answered from her other side, also sounding very tired. "Two days, Commander. You had even me worried this time."

That gave Shepard pause; Karin had seen her through a lot of shit-storms, and had never lost faith that she'd pull through. "What happened?" Shepard's voice came out like a scratch of fingernails on a chalkboard.
"We were hoping you could tell us. You were at the galaxy map when you suddenly grabbed your head and started screaming. The only way we managed to stop your thrashing was to sedate you and then place you into a medical coma. When your brainwaves stabilized and we went to wake you up, you didn't respond." Chakwas shook her head. "Never seen anything like it and the entire crew has been on edge, given the circumstances. We honestly thought we'd lost you. Liara arrived and immediately offered to meld with you. To find you, she said. Said she could sense you, so knew you weren't gone, just disoriented and lost."

Shepard turned her head to look at the Asari by her side. She was still slumped in fatigue, but her eyes were open again and she had a tired smile on her face. Shepard's hand extended out and Liara latched on. {Thank you, Blue. Can you get me a datapad? I need to explain what happened and my voice isn't up to it. Hurts, but time is of the essence. Did you see any of it while you searched for me?}

Liara shook her head 'no' to the last question and then looked to Karin, explaining what Shepard needed. The doctor adjusted the bed to a sitting position and gave her a datapad, a throat lozenge and a glass of some soothing liquid that Shepard didn't recognize. "Small frequent sips while you work. If you get tired, rest. Don't worry. I'll keep the hounds at bay until you're ready. Admiral Hackett is calling every hour requesting updates. As he put it, he needs to know what the hell happened out there."

Shepard nodded in response, and then glanced back at Liara. {Blue, eavesdrop as I write. I need you to know what I've done... what put me where you found me.} Shepard could see an atypical look in Liara's eyes; it almost looked like fear.

Liara had seen many of Shepard's nightmares and she knew it would take something horribly frightening to force Shepard out of herself like that. She wasn't sure she wanted to know, but for Shepard's sake, she did as she was asked. Shepard scooted over and they got comfortable side-by-side on the med-bed as the commander typed up her mission report for Hackett. Liara gasped at the countdown clock, muttered at the stupidity of Object Rho being left unshielded and went completely pale when the Project VI announced the consequences; she suddenly realized the system's obliteration had not been an accident. Shepard had known and elected to push the button. Liara's eyes closed and she took a shuddering breath as she steadied herself to speak. Shepard felt the Asari's distress at the revelations through the link and stopped typing, set the datapad down and took a pair of blue hands in her own as she spoke to Liara through the link.

{I look back now and think about what Kenson told me on the shuttle... she gave me an angry look and said, "When they get here, they'll use the Bahak relay to travel throughout the galaxy." She wasn't mad about the Reapers using the relay; she was mad that I was there to stop it and was telling me I was going to fail. And, she'd gotten orders to keep me alive and didn't like it. I totally misread her anger.}

When Liara's eyes opened again she whispered, almost not daring to say the words aloud. "Goddess, Shepard. They're coming. They're in the Viper Nebula. If you hadn't destroyed the relay... they'd be spreading through the galaxy as we speak!" Liara looked at Shepard's expression. "But even that isn't what cast you out of your own mind, is it?"

Shepard closed her eyes and swallowed, telling Liara about the inroads Object Rho had made into her mind during the two days of sedation and sharing how she felt its death, along with many of the system's 305,000 souls, all at once in the blink of an eye. When Dr Chakwas walked in and found them a bit later, the datapad was set on the side table and the two were cuddled tightly together fast asleep, exhausted by the emotional toll the revelations took on both of them and seeking solace in one another. Karin picked up the datapad and scanned through it, her eyes flashing wide. She
immediately called Hackett, both to update him on Shepard's status and to pass on they had a prisoner in the brig to hand over; Jacob Taylor could provide details.

Chakwas woke them a bit later and warned them Hackett was on his way from Arcturus Station. They got up and Liara helped Shepard into her uniform. The commander was incredibly stiff after having her entire nervous system forcibly shut down and then having to fight her way off the station, only to be immediately followed by a coma-induced stillness for two solid days. Karin was surprised she was moving at all. Hackett arrived and Shepard stood to salute but he waived her down. "Relax, Shepard. You've had a tough few days, but it looks like you've recovered." His face twitched, but she couldn't tell what expression he was hiding. "Physically at least." His glance traveled to Liara.

Shepard anticipated what he was going to say and intercepted any objections he may have wanted to raise about her presence in the room. "She staying, Sir. We're linked, so she'll hear whatever you tell me anyway."

Hackett actually smiled. "Commander, you're good, but you're no mind reader. I was actually going to thank Dr T'Soni for bringing you back to us yet again. From what Dr Chakwas says, you were beyond her medical ability to treat...and that's saying a lot."

Shepard glanced at Liara, who was blushing. "Thank you, Sir. She's pretty much been my lifeline for a while now. Obviously we'll have to discuss a few things if I'm to come back to the Alliance when this is done."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Shepard. For now, we have bigger fish to fry. What the hell happened out there, Commander? A mass relay and a whole Batarian system destroyed?"

Hackett shook his head. "I put it all in the report, Sir. I didn't write it for political correctness. It's all true. Every word. When we jumped the relay out of the system, we literally beat the Reapers by minutes. I'm sure they're raining hell on the Batarians in the Viper Nebula as we speak."

Hackett grimaced. "So Amanda really was indoctrinated. Well. That's... a damn shame. I won't lie to you, Shepard. Reapers or not, the Batarians will want blood. And with them having captured Dr Kenson, there's just enough evidence for an Alliance witch hunt. If the Reapers really are coming, we can't waste time or resources on a war with the Batarians."

Liara's face held an expression of concern. "What are you saying, Admiral? You can't expect Shepard to sacrifice herself to the Batarians to secure peace! We need her to finish this war!"

Hackett raised his eyebrows at the normally reserved doctor's interjection, but he responded. "Don't you worry about that, Dr T'Soni. You're preaching to the choir. If it were up to me, I'd give her a damn medal. Unfortunately, not everyone will see it that way." His gaze shifted back to Shepard. "For now, you stay out here and keep fighting the good fight. I'll forward your report to Anderson and Tevos. They'll be able to stall any Council actions, buy you time and serve as their notice of the Reaper presence. But sooner or later you'll have to face the music. When Earth calls, make sure you're there with your dress blues on, ready to take the hit."

"Understood, Sir." She glanced at Liara and squeezed her hand in warning, hoping Liara wouldn't react negatively to what she was about to say. "When it's time, I'll turn myself in. No argument."

"Good. But for now, you still have a mission to complete. Colonists are still disappearing every day; stop the Collectors from taking any more of them, Shepard. When you're ready to come home, you let me know and we'll put you under military 'house arrest' on Earth and we'll have you work with the Defense Council. To outsiders, it will look like you're in jail awaiting trial, and it should keep the
Batarians at bay." Hackett looked disgusted with himself. "That's assuming there's any left. With no allies to call on, if the Reapers are really there, the Batarians won't last very long."

Shepard grimaced. "The Reapers are there, Sir. But there's also a lot of Batarians scattered throughout the galaxy. They aren't limited to their home system any more than the rest of us."

Hackett nodded in appreciation. "You're right, but you let me worry about that and you focus on whatever you need to do out here. You've done a hell of a thing, Commander. You've bought us time. Good luck." With that, Hackett said his goodbyes and walked out the door.
Broken Trust

Chapter Notes

EM - Electro-Magnetic
IFF - Identification of Friend or Foe
QEC - Quantum Entanglement Communicator. Instantaneous point-to-point secure communications device; cannot be intercepted between source and destination
Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)
SMG - Sub-machine gun

After Hackett walked out, Liara exhaled heavily and worked her jaw in an effort to relax the tension resulting from not objecting to Shepard's agreement to turn herself in. Shepard could feel the strain, but Liara was blocking the link, so she got no indication as to what the Asari was thinking. She turned and looked at her lover. "Well, that could have gone worse."

Liara huffed and looked at her with frustration. "And I was going to say it could have gone better." She stopped Shepard's protest with a hand held up between them and a shake of her head. "Don't. I understand your reasoning, but it still irritates me that after all you have done, everything you have done for them, they are still so quick to judge and use you as a scapegoat." Shepard heard the shift in Liara's voice from irritation to sarcasm with her next statement. "I'm just glad they were so gracious as to not arrest you on the spot, so you could continue their fight against the Collectors for the Human colonies!"

Shepard stepped toward her, extending a hand and started speaking, "Li..."

The hand was ignored as Liara glared at her. "Shepard. You have given them everything, right down to your very life! They have no claim on you! Not anymore. They lost that right when they abandoned you on Alchera!" Liara's voice started to shake and tears came to her eyes as she forced out her last words. "They don't see the torture you put yourself through with the decisions you are forced to make! I can't sit idly by and let you go to a military tribunal where you could be put to death for wiping out a system of 305,000 people when you had no choice! I won't!"

Shepard's face reflected shock. "Liara! He said house arrest. Where did you get that idea from?"

"His entire plan is predicated on two major assumptions. One, the Reapers wiping out the Batarians so they can't lodge a protest with the Council or threaten the Alliance with war." In her anger, Liara had regained some of her control. "And two, that what Admiral Hackett personally believes is what the Alliance will actually do once they have you in custody. Considering some of them are willing to brand you a traitor for working with Cerberus, I do not want to bet your life on those presumptions."

Shepard didn't make any more arguments; she just stepped to Liara and wrapped her in an embrace. Liara's body was unyielding for a few very long seconds before relaxing into the embrace and whispering in Shepard's ear, "I can't let you sacrifice yourself for people who give you hardly any consideration. I love and respect you too much, and I am tired of dragging you back from the brink of death, Siame."

Shepard's heart ached for the Asari, realizing decisions she made and actions she took affected Liara as much as they affected her. She held her lover close and breathed in her comforting scent of
Thessian rose and eezo for a long while before pushing away and looking into a still stressed Asari face. "Liara. I need to talk to you about something. Something that may ease your fears a bit."

"If that's actually a possibility, please do tell." Liara sighed, thinking nothing could really accomplish that goal at the moment.

"There are some medical cybernetic upgrades I've been putting off. We have the technology and the materials. I just haven't taken the downtime to do them." Shepard saw she had Liara's full attention, so pressed on. "You can get specifics from Karin, but they are basically three types of heavy synthetic weaves to improve strength and durability of my bones, muscles and skin. If I do them, my whole body will be tougher, stronger, and heal even faster than I do now."

"It certainly can't be as simple as that, or you would have done them already." Liara focused on Shepard's face and could see concern written there. "What bothers you about them?"

Shepard sighed and pulled away, leaning against one of the med beds. "I already wonder how much of this body is actually mine anymore. How many more synthetic parts can I add before I stop being me?"

Tears sprang to Liara's eyes and she stepped forward and clasped Shepard's hands. "I knew it was you the minute I touched you on Illium and it was certainly confirmed the first time we melded." A hand went up and fingers rifled through strands of auburn hair. "And honestly, Shepard. The heart and mind are what I care about." Liara smirked for just a moment, "Not that I don't love this body and everything it does to me, but it is not what defines you." Liara looked into the commander's eyes. "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." Liara rested one hand over Shepard's heart. "This belongs to me..." Her other hand tapped a finger lightly on Shepard's temple. "...and this. As long as you don't take them away from me, I am content."

Shepard pushed herself off the bed and into Liara's arms, wrapping the Asari in a tight hug and murmuring into her ear. "I love you, Dr Liara T'Soni. More than anything. You know that?"

"I count on it, Commander. Every day of my life." Liara kissed Shepard's neck and reveled in the comfort of the strong arms surrounding her. After a few moments, she started to pull away.

Shepard reluctantly released her and asked quietly, "You need to get back to work?"

Liara wrinkled her brow. "Yes, but I'm not going anywhere until Karin clears you medically."

Shepard looked at her in surprise, so Liara canted her head and continued. "I am going to make sure you follow her instructions and get yourself completely healthy before going out with a ground team again."

"So you'll stay until I'm better?" Shepard smirked. "I may just have to break something on purpose, if it will keep you here... with me."

"Oh. Really?" Liara glowered at her. "You do such a thing on purpose, Commander, and I will make sure it is so painful you will never. ever. try that tactic again."

Shepard stepped back from the Shadow Broker with a slightly concerned look on her face. "I almost believe you're serious about that, Dr T'Soni."

"You should believe it, Shepard. Because I am." Without ceremony, Liara turned and walked out to the Mess to get some tea, leaving Shepard standing by herself in the med bay.
"Damn, T'Soni. You've grown claws."

Shepard laughed when an answer laced with humor came back through the doorway. "I heard that, Shepard. And you don't know the half of it."

Events suddenly started happening quickly. It started with a summons to the communications room and when Shepard arrived, the council was already onscreen and awaiting her arrival. Anderson and Tevos had their hands full keeping the peace. Valern was demanding some type of proof before being willing to accept that the Reapers existed and were already in Batarian space, which Shepard didn't have because the Normandy had to escape through the relay before it was destroyed, and subsequently before any of the Reapers actually showed up in the system. Once she revealed she had no concrete evidence, Sparatus was quick to refer to her 'story' as a desperate fabrication to give credence to her Reaper theory and wanted her to return immediately to the Citadel for an inquiry into the destruction of the relay. The responses from the others varied in degree; Anderson exploded with an 'absolutely not,' Tevos admonished the Turian councilor for his unsupported accusations because evidence was lacking for either argument, and Valern disagreed on the principle that Shepard needed to stay in the field to verify or debunk Kenson's theory. As the council continued to argue, a perturbed Shepard muttered, "Councilors, I have things to get done," and promptly reached up and slammed her fist down on the disconnect button. Shepard yelled a string of frustrated profanities into the air, then leaned against the table and hung her head in disgust, her shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Joker must have been listening in, because mere moments later Shepard heard the door behind her slide open and then closed again. No words were spoken, but she sensed it was Liara and soon enough a gentle hand was laid upon her back. Shepard stood and turned to the Asari. "Not here, Liara. My cabin."

The minute the door closed, Shepard started to pace like a caged animal. "I really don't fucking believe it. I swear, Liara. I'm tempted to have you arrange for Sparatus' demise. Some accident needs to befall that stubborn son-of-a-bitch or he's going to be the death of us all."

Shock stole Liara's breath, so she practically had to wheeze out her response. "Shepard! Assassination of a councilor? You can't honestly mean that!"

Shepard stopped and turned to Liara and looked her in the eyes. After a brief moment she broke contact and looked down at the floor in defeat. "No, I don't. I did only say tempted." She paused for a moment to close her eyes and scrub her forehead, trying to stem the headache that was raging to the fore. "I just get so frustrated with their lack of trust. No, with his lack of trust. Anderson and Tevos support me, and Valern at least has the decency to withhold judgment until hard evidence points one way or another."

Liara's brow wrinkled. "What did he say to you, Shepard?"

"He flat out called me a liar. Said I fabricated the story about Object Rho and the imminent invasion as evidence for my deluded Reaper theory." Shepard stomped over to her liquor cabinet and opened it. After staring in the door for a few seconds she slammed it shut, having taken nothing out. "Shit!"

Liara's arms circled around her waist from the back and held her close. A soft voice whispered in her ear, "Please, Samantha. Do not let him upset you so. He is but one voice, and we have Anderson and Tevos on our side. Valern sees reason when presented with the facts. He'll come around."

Shepard sighed heavily, sounding defeated. "When, Liara? When the Reapers pop through the
Citadel relay? It'll be too late. This time it won't be just a vanguard. Oh yeah. And Sparatus wants me at the Citadel for an inquiry."

Liara stiffened slightly and her grip around Samantha's waist tightened. "I assume the other councilors disagreed?"

"Well, kind of... They hadn't really made a decision, and while they were arguing about it amongst themselves, I... well. I hung up on them." Shepard laughed lightly at Liara's rapid intake of breath.

"Wait. You did what?" Liara released her hold and turned Shepard to face her. The look on Shepard's face told her everything. "You really did, didn't you?" As the impertinent grin on Shepard's face widened, Liara couldn't help but giggle at the impish expression on her lover's face. "Oh, my. You haven't done that in a long time. That's... not going to paint you in a favorable light." Liara's hand covered her mouth in an attempt to stifle it, but the giggle turned infectious and pretty soon both of them were outright laughing at the situation.

Shepard finally wiped the laughter tears from her eyes and sighed happily. "Thanks, Blue. I needed that. Aahhhh. I think I'm better now." With a tender smile, she stepped up to the beautiful being in front of her and wrapped her in a loving embrace, placing an impassioned kiss on her soft blue lips. The link flared and Liara's block fell away, their two consciousnesses merging in a joyful reunion. Shepard broke the kiss in surprise at the incoming surge of emotion. "By the way, I umm... I didn't want to push, but whatever reason you had must be gone, so... why were you blocking me?"

Liara blushed. "I have told you before, you have an incredibly strong mind. Your emotional energy has been overwhelming since you got back from Bahak." She looked down at the floor. "It was dark, Sam. So very dark. I..." Her eyes came back up to meet Shepard's. "It was alarming and I didn't want you to sense my fear or my concern. I was here to try and help you, not add to your distress."

A flash of pain streaked through Shepard's eyes and her brow furrowed. "I'm sorry, Blue." Her expression lightened and a soft smile returned to her lips. "I assume it's better now... and it's all because of you. You're amazing. You know that?"

"Only in your eyes, Siame." Liara leaned in for another kiss as Joker came over the comm.

"Commander. Urgent message coming in from the Illusive Man on the QEC." They both groaned, almost in perfect unison, at Jeff's consistently imperfect timing.

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Liara's head snapped up from the datapad she was using when Shepard burst back into the loft quarters. "Liara! I'm sorry, Blue, but you gotta go."

"What?" Liara's face showed both confusion and concern as she stood. "What's going on? Just where am I going?"

"A Turian patrol supposedly stumbled onto a Collector ship beyond the Korlus system. The patrol was wiped out, but not before they crippled the Collector ship and sent a distress call. TIM wants us to intercept it and see what we can see. He hopes we can get on board and get a hard fix on the location of the Collector homeworld. At this point, any data we can get on them is critical." Shepard looked apologetic, but firm.

"How did a patrol ship take out a Collector vessel? We've seen first-hand what they can do, Shepard." Liara involuntarily shivered as she closed the gap and gripped Shepard's hand tightly,
fearful memories stealing her breath as she desperately searched Sam's face for some crack in the commander's resolve to send her away. Again.

"I don't know. I asked the same question, and TIM didn't have any answers. He admits it's a long shot, and probably very dangerous, but it's an opportunity we can't pass up." Shepard dropped her hand. "Go on. Grab your stuff. I'll walk you to your shuttle. You're taking Judea and Sellis back with you as well. Riana, too, but that's a given. They've already been notified. We're already enroute to the relay and can take you as far as the Eagle Nebula, but then you need to launch and continue on to Hagalaz. I need you to keep doing what you do best and keep gathering everything you can on the Collectors and the Reapers."

"Shepard." Liara hadn't moved from her spot. "Why do I need to leave? We can help you."

Shepard closed her eyes and leaned forward, touching foreheads. *Because, Siame. Because this screams trap and should anything happen to me or the Normandy, I need to know you'll be able to pick up the pieces and continue the fight. I am so sorry.*

Tears streamed down Liara's face as she whispered back. "You just remember your promise to me, Commander. We have four hundred years ahead of us and some blue babies to raise."

Shepard stood up straight and carefully wiped all of Liara's tears away. The commander's face held a reflective smile as she answered loud and clear. "More than enough reason to come home to you, Dr T'Soni."

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Shepard stood on the Bridge as they approached the Collector ship. Edi provided a quick status update, "Very low emissions. Passive infrared temperatures suggest most systems are offline. Thrusters are cold. The drive core is offline."

Joker looked at the behemoth before them. "The thing's massive! How the hell did the Turians take it out?"

Shepard's eyes scanned the space surrounding the vessel. "They didn't. There's no other ship out here. No wreckage, no debris. It's a set-up, but we need the data. We're going in anyway. Just be ready to bug out and hope Tali's cyclone-whatever-thing she did to our shields works." She laid a hand on Joker's shoulder. "Jeff. If you get the data upload and something happens to us over there, you bug-out. Do not hesitate. Get the Normandy clear and get that data to Liara."

Joker glanced back over his shoulder and looked at Shepard with a frown, actually serious for once in his life. "Understood, Commander. Just make sure it doesn't come to that."

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Knowing it was a trap, Shepard felt exposed heading onto the Collector ship. Even though they brought a full team of six, the ship was massive, the team was dwarfed by comparison, and they had no idea what kind of trap they were walking into or when it would be sprung. Even still, they needed whatever data they could get on the Collector homeworld, so Mordin and Tali came for their technical expertise and their 'protection detail' consisted of the commander, Samara, Grunt and Garrus. Shepard purposely avoided bringing human crew because of the potential to run into seeker swarms; no sense in taking extra risks with the swarms specifically targeting them. The vessel looked more like an insect hive than a ship, and the idea of knowingly walking into a trap had everyone on edge. Edi had completed her scans and passed coordinates to their omnitools for an access node to uplink the Collector databanks. Shepard glanced around at her team. "Alright. We've got our first
target. Move fast and stay frosty!"

Shepard shivered when Edi made her next announcement. "Shepard. I have compared the ship's EM signature with known Collector profiles. It is the vessel you encountered on Horizon.

Mordin spoke for the group. "Could find missing colonists aboard. If they're still alive."

When they got to the first uplink node, Edi made a startling discovery; the Collectors contained a quad-strand genetic structure similar to only one known race. Shepard cursed. "The Protheans didn't vanish. They were genetically modified and indoctrinated by the Reapers!"

As they moved through the ship, they started seeing pods that were similar to those they had seen on Horizon and Eden Prime. Edi detected no life signs and hypothesized the victims had died when the ship lost primary power. Shepard cursed again; there would be no rescues of any colonists today. As if knowing it was the same ship that had raided Horizon wasn't bad enough, Jeff asked Edi to run a second analysis and the results were even worse, bringing back memories she preferred to not think about, especially when they were still on the Collector ship. They were on the ship that had destroyed the original Normandy two years prior. Shepard's feet ground to a halt and Garrus slid up beside her. Garrus' voice right next to her ear shook her out of her paralysis, "On your toes, kids. Shepard's right. This is no coincidence. This is definitely a trap. Be ready for anything."

They finally emerged into a huge central chamber. Mordin glanced around. "Amazing. Every Human in Terminus not enough to fill these. Only one conclusion. Collectors targeting Earth."

Shepard growled, "Not if we stop them!"

They approached the main control panel that Edi had indicated as the main uplink site. As Mordin and Tali got to work, the rest set up a defensive perimeter.

Samara spoke for the first time. "We have been lured to the heart of the trap. I imagine they shall spring it at any moment and will try to prevent our departure with the data."

Tali spoke. "Got it. Edi, you should have access to the data now." Her focus shifted to the commander. "Shepard. You do realize the start of the data upload is probably the trigger to release the Collectors from their stasis pods or whatever shielded area that's hiding them from our scanners, right?"

Grunt stomped a foot. "Good! All this walking and talking makes me ready to kill something!"

Shepard didn't respond to any of them; she simply remained on high alert, constantly surveilled their surroundings and waited for the trap to be sprung.

Joker saw the screens on the Normandy flicker and he caught a glimpse of an image that looked suspiciously like the Collector General. "Uh, Commander? Seeing some weird stuff up here. No way it's good... I'd be ready if I were you."

"Thanks, Joker. We're ready for whatever they throw at us." Shepard hoped she wasn't lying.

Suddenly the platform the team was on started spinning, lifting away from the surface and moving deeper into the ship. Shepard looked around and was surprisingly calm as she spoke, "Uhm... need a little help here, Edi."

Edi responded, "I am having trouble maintaining connection. Someone else is in the system."

Behind the commander, Tali shouted out, "I'm working on it!" After a few moments, she shouted
again, "Got it! Oh, crap. No I don't! Oh. Wait. Yes I do!"

The platform jerked to a stop unexpectedly, throwing them all off balance. A second platform rose from around a corner and headed toward them, an unknown number of Collectors aboard.

Liara settled comfortably into her desk chair and pulled up the Broker databases, quickly reviewing the status updates from Arlyna and Feron. Satisfied they had done all that needed to be done in her absence, Liara turned her focus to other matters that would possibly demand her undivided attention in the near future. "Glyph. I need you to consolidate complete dossiers on all the Alliance leadership senior to Admiral Hackett and place them, sorted by name, into individual files on my personal system, my eyes only."

"Understood, Dr T'Soni." The blue and white electronic globe flashed rapidly, quickly collating a list of names. "Do you want me to include only the military chain of command or do you require dossiers on the civilian leadership as well, Doctor?"

Liara blinked, having not considered the civilian leadership. "Thank you, Glyph. Include the civilian side as well. Also, please build a dossier on Councilor Sparatus."

*I've lost you once, Shepard. No one is taking you from me ever again.*

The bark of a sniper rifle was immediately followed by the first Collector tumbling from the platform and Garrus quipping, "Nice of them to stop for me so I could aim easier!"

The team took up defensive positions and prepared for battle. Thanks to Garrus, the first platform to arrive only had three Collectors on it, and they went down very quickly. However, a second platform followed the first and the onboard scion delivered a frost-shockwave, dealing some serious damage to Shepard before they even realized it was there. Grunt launched himself over the wall and charged it, knocking it backwards and blasting its head off with his shotgun. "No touching my Battlemaster!"

Shepard knelt down and gave herself a blast of medigel as she glanced over her shoulder. "How's it coming back there?"

Edi chimed in, "Tali reestablished the connection, but I must finish the download before I can override any systems. I am currently at forty-one percent."

In the meantime, a third platform rolled in, with only three more Collectors, and then a forth that was loaded. There were at least five Collectors and a Scion on board and the battle got a little more stressful. "Edi! Get on it!"

Mordin had gotten in on the action and started firing off cryo-blasts, which Grunt absolutely loved. The Krogan was happily pounding his way through the newly created ice sculptures when Edi spoke again.

The AI almost sounded exasperated when she replied. "I am working as fast as the Collector system allows, Shepard. For such advanced technology, their data speed is incredibly sluggish."

Tali shouted, "That's because they put a restrictor on the system, which should be disappearing... right about... now!"

Edi's voice reflected surprise. "Thank you, Tali'Zorah. Shepard. I am ready. You must now return to
the platform to reestablish my link to the command console from your end."

"Alright, everybody. You heard her. Back to our magic carpet!" Shepard returned to the main console and glanced around, realizing not everyone followed her. "Now! Get back on the platform. We're moving out!"

When Grunt got back, he looked at her, "What the hell is a magic carpet, Shepard?"

Shepard's face went blank. "Oh for... Never mind. I'll explain later! Edi, we're all on board. It's all yours. Did you get what we needed?"

Edi sounded almost smug. "I found data that could help us successfully navigate the Omega-4 Relay. I have also found the Turian distress call that served as the lure for this trap. The Turians did not send it; the Collectors were the source. It is... unusual."

Shepard frowned. "What do you mean, unusual?"

Edi responded, "Turian emergency channels have secondary encryption. It is present, but corrupted in the message. It is not possible that the Illusive Man would believe the distress call was genuine."

Shepard's eyes narrowed. "How can you be so sure?"

"I found the anomaly with Cerberus detection protocols. He wrote them."

Shepard growled, "I knew it. I specifically asked the question and he lied to my face. Knowing the Collectors are after me, that son-of-a-bitch sent us right into their hands anyway, without giving us any warning."

Samara's eyes opened wide. "So the Illusive Man knew it was a trap and he purposely deceived you as to its validity?"

Mordin commented, "Foolish to trust Cerberus. Mistake on my part."

Shepard almost laughed. "That's why I already told you all it was probably a trap, and why I brought a full crew. Never trust Cerberus, Mordin. Just trust me and the team to survive whatever the asshole throws at us. Take us out of here, Edi!"

Edi delivered the platform to the nearest exit and the team moved out. The ships systems were starting to come back online and Joker cut in, telling them to hotfoot it; he wanted to be gone before the weapons systems came back online. He wasn't ready to test Tali's newly installed barrier technology quite yet. Since they were traveling unfamiliar corridors, Edi gave them guidance whenever they came to an intersection, and the team moved relatively quickly. They moved into a large room and Mordin called out, "Headed for combat!"

Shepard hadn't seen anything yet but soon realized there were winged Collectors dropping from access tubes high on the wall. Since she no longer needed to focus on data downloads, Tali immediately launched Chatika before drawing her shotgun. Garrus hung back and found some cover to start picking them off with his sniper rifle, and Grunt just shouted with glee, "More!" before charging into battle.

Shepard had her shotgun at the ready and she pulled on her biotics to charge forward. Just as she started to surge forward the target in front of her froze; Mordin had launched a cryo blast, so when Shepard hit the target it shattered into a thousand ice crystals. The battle was over quickly and the team moved on to the next lower level. The next room was very similar to the one above it, with multiple barricades and Collectors dropping from the upper balconies. There seemed to be many
more of them, and before the fight was over one of the Collectors was actually possessed by the Collector General. Fortunately, by the time he showed up most of the other Collectors were already dead, so much of the team's fire support was directed at just him. The Collector General did not last long.

As they progressed down the pathway, they came to a drop-off. It wasn't terribly far, but enough of a drop that it was obviously one-way. Shepard verified with Edi it was the right direction before jumping down. Edi answered promptly, "Yes, Shepard. Proceed down the ramp, and I will open a door on the far right side of the room."

As the team dropped off the ledge, they found themselves on a shelf with two ramps that ran down to yet another level. The door that Edi opened was definitely on the far side and definitely not going to be easy to get to... as the door opened, a huge Praetorian floated in. The Praetorian's most dangerous weapon was its particle beam because a single strike would easily knock out shields; a second one could kill. The team had faced one of those monstrosities on Horizon and it had not been easy to take down. Then, the team had only four guns ... now it had six, and with a lot more experience under everyone's belt.

As soon as he saw it, Garrus started to bombard it with concussive rounds while Shepard swapped out her shotgun for her heavy pistol. No way did she plan to get into shotgun range with this monster. Her biotic charge was useless against the flying beast, so she had to resort to longer range attacks. Mordin focused on incendiaries, with both tech attacks and incendiary ammo in his SMG, which was excellent against its armor. However, the best addition to the team in this case was Samara. The Asari Justicar had mastered reave, a biotic skill that did massive damage to armor and barriers...which just also happened to be the Praetorian's two primary defenses. Meanwhile, Tali, Chatika, and Grunt concentrated on the ground forces, which included Collectors and husks. Not that Grunt couldn't have handled it, but they were fortunate in the fact that the Collector General didn't show up to complicate matters.

The Praetorian made it very obvious Shepard was the target, focusing on and solely pursuing her, even as her teammates continued to hammer it with heavy concussions, incendiaries and reaves. Shepard ducked behind a stone pillar to get away from the particle beam. Then, as soon as the beam stopped and the Praetorian paused to recharge, Shepard would dive out, get off as many shots as she could and then jump behind some new cover to avoid the thing's next attack. The team stayed scattered so the Praetorian could only face one at a time but it didn't matter; every bit of its attention was focused on the commander. Soon, she found the only thing she was doing was dodging because the monster had gotten too close. She picked a distant husk that Tali hadn't killed yet and used it as a target to charge at, both killing the husk and greatly increasing the distance between herself and the Praetorian. She finally located a large rock out in the middle of the cavern, and she just kept circling it, keeping the obstacle between her and the Praetorian while her team continued to chip away. Finally, the Praetorian went down for good and they all breathed a sigh of relief and made their way to the exit and up a short ramp.

At the top, a number of Collectors were lying in wait, hidden behind barricades, and the Collector General was much more active, continuously possessing one of the Collectors so he was almost always in the fight. With the full team working together, the Collectors went down quickly, even when a Scion jumped into the mix. Just as they finished off the Scion and got on the move again, Joker piped into the comms, "Hate to rush you, but those weapons are about to come online! Might want to double-time it... You know, so we can leave before they try to blow the Normandy in half again."

As they sprinted down the last corridor, they were stopped once again, this time by a hoard of husks. Grunt jumped in with his shotgun and omniblade, literally tearing them up and casting body parts to
the sides. Samara generated a shock wave and threw them all back, stunning them, and the rest of the team had target practice, killing them before they could get back up again. Grunt actually complained about the Justicar taking away all his fun before Shepard yelled, "No time! Get your ass to the shuttle!"

The team jumped on the shuttle and it returned to the Normandy. As soon as the doors closed, Joker pushed the engines to the max. As they left the Collector vessel behind, it got off its first shot, going high and right. Joker yelled out, "I can't dodge this thing forever, Edi. Get us the hell out of here!"

Edi came back very calmly with, "Specify a destination, Mr Moreau."


"Crescent Nebula, for Gods' sake!" Shepard was not pleased with Flight Lieutenant Moreau's continued friction with the AI, to say the least... especially when it put the ground team or the ship in danger.

Edi came back immediately, "Very well, Commander. Engaging mass effect core," and they left the Collector ship quickly behind with a short FTL trip back to the system's mass relay followed by an immediate jump to the Tasale system, near Ilium.

As the team breathed a sigh of relief and dumped their gear off at the armory, Joker came on comm, "Call coming in from TIM, Commander. Figure you've got a few words for him, too."

Shepard ground her teeth and walked silently to the QEC. As soon as the connection was made, TIM started speaking about the interesting data Edi had collected before the vessel had come back online. Shepard leaned into the viewer and growled, "Cut the act! You set us up and there's not a good enough reason in the galaxy to do that to your best chance at winning this war. You could have gotten us killed, you bastard!"

TIM was completely unrepentant. "We needed information on the Omega-4 Relay. That required direct access to Collector data. It was too good an opportunity to pass up."

"I agree the data was important, but I don't like surprises." Shepard cut him no slack. "Especially when my ass is on the line. You could have told me what was going on."

"I put you as risk, yes, but without that information, we don't reach the Collector homeworld... and you and every other human may as well be dead." TIM reached across and snuffed his cigarette out in an ashtray. "It was a trap, but I was afraid of tipping the Collectors off that we knew. And I am confident in your abilities. Plus, there's no way the Collectors could have anticipated Edi."

"Yeah, well, Edi alone didn't cut it. She needed help from Mordin and Tali to get it done. Good thing I picked them for the team." Shepard sneered. "You have one job... information. If I can't trust your intel, you're useless to me."

TIM stood, irritated by her attitude. "It's not that simple...you of all people should know that."

Shepard huffed. "I do know that. But I also know I have to completely trust my team in order for us to operate at peak efficiency. This mission is going to require our best effort... it's going to require trust, and you just blew your chance. Not telling us what we're heading into, when you knew, is bullshit! I'm going to be a lot more careful, with the Collectors and with you."

TIM backed off, realizing he may have pushed too far. "This is no time for petty grudges. Things are about to get a lot tougher. Edi confirmed our suspicions; the Reapers and Collectors use a specialized IFF system to get safely through the Omega-4 relay to their homeworld." TIM lit up a new cigarette
and took a couple of puffs before continuing. "We need to get our hands on one."

Shepard growled, "Breaking trust is NOT a petty grudge. Trust defines a relationship that works. No trust defines one that won't. You don't get a second chance, so don't ever lie to me again."

TIM narrowed his eyes in anger. "Don't try to threaten me, Shepard. It won't go well for you."

Shepard shook her head, dismissing his attempt to threaten her back. "Whatever. I'm the best chance you've got to survive this shit-storm, so sorry if I hurt your feelings, but you can shove your pride where the sun doesn't shine. Now, how the hell do we find an IFF?"

TIM then talked about an Alliance science team that discovered an impact crater from a very old mass accelerator weapon and how he assigned a research team to track down the weapon and its target. When they found the target, it was a derelict Reaper. They quickly sent a team out to study it, but had lost contact with them. TIM leaned back in his chair before he continued, "Initial reconnaissance revealed no clues, and it was risky to commit more resources, but now... we need that IFF. I'll forward the coordinates to Joker. In the meantime, I suggest you tell the crew I didn't risk their lives unnecessarily. It will make things easier going forward."

In the briefing room, Shepard told the group what had happened and what the Illusive Man expected her to pass on. No one believed the gall in the Illusive Man's statement, and no one believed he wouldn't try to do it again. Shepard shook her head in disgust. "We could've accomplished the mission just as well had he been honest with us. The only reason I took the team I did was because I believed it was a trap. I just can't believe him telling us ahead of time would have somehow tipped off the Collectors and adversely impacted the mission, so all he's done is completely ruined his credibility. He tries something like that again, the Collectors will be the least of his problems." She paused only briefly, just long enough to determine that no one had any objections to her announcement, including Miranda and Jacob. She turned her focus back to the mission. "Edi, analysis of the data and the potential for the IFF?"

"An IFF will work, Shepard." Edi was very confident in her analytical abilities. "I have also determined the approximate location of the Collector homeworld, based on navigational data from their vessel."

She projected a map of the galaxy and placed the homeworld inside the galactic core. Mordin stared at it only a moment before speaking. "Of course. Why it has gone undetected so long and why no one has ever returned. Artificial construct, like Reapers themselves. Space station protected by mass effect fields and radiation shields."

Shepard's eyes went wide with wonder, "No wonder nobody's ever returned from a trip through the Omega-4 Relay. Tough to navigate around black holes."

Edi continued her analysis, "The logical conclusion is that a small safe-zone exists on the far side of the relay. The Reaper IFF must trigger usage of a special set of transit protocols that limit drift, to ensure accurate transit to the limited safe-zone."

"Thanks, Edi." Shepard paced. "Just because we can follow the Collectors through the relay doesn't mean it's time to go yet. We've got some missions the crew still needs to finish up. TIM's already proven unreliable, so we're going to head to Hagalaz and do some research; track some people down and see what we can find on this derelict Reaper."
As soon as she set foot on the Broker ship, she felt Liara's mental tap and could sense the warm, welcoming smile in Liara's voice. *Shepard. You know where I am... come to me soon, please?*

Shepard laughed, gaining a few odd looks from some new crew who didn't realize who she was, either as the commander or as Liara's bondmate, but she didn't care. *On my way, Blue. I assume you're at your desk in front of a million monitors, processing twenty messages all at the same time. Be there shortly.*

She had come to the ship with Garrus, Miranda, Tali and Jacob. Garrus and Jacob were going to hit the various terminals and do people searches, resource management, and systems upgrades while Tali was going to work with Feron to explain the new Cyclonic Barrier Technology she had developed so they could get it onto the Broker ships and out to the galaxy at large so all the races could upgrade their fleets defensive capabilities. Shepard was going to steal Liara away and talk about derelict Reapers, IFFs and the status of the Broker mobile platforms. If they got all that done, Shepard also wanted to talk about four hundred years and little blue babies.

Miranda was on something of a personal mission. She no longer trusted the Illusive Man's motives and did not believe he was solely focused on humanity's best interests. She felt he had fallen victim to the corruption that power so often brings, and she certainly no longer trusted him to have her nor Oriana's wellbeing in mind. She didn't know what his endgame was anymore, but she did know she no longer wanted to be a part of it. When the mission was over and the commander went back to the Alliance, Miranda would leave Cerberus and she hoped to find a place somewhere on Liara's team; assuming the Asari would take her.

As the team reached Central Operations and broke out to their separate work areas, Shepard was surprised when Miranda continued with her toward Liara. She stopped and turned to the operative. "Miranda, you need something from me?"

Miranda took a deep breath, and looked to Liara as she answered. "Actually, Commander, I'd like a quick moment of Dr T'Soni's time, if you don't mind?"

Both Liara and Shepard looked at Miranda with something akin to surprise. Shepard shook her head. "No, that's fine. I'll just... um... hit up the surveys and available deliveries terminals. Let me know when you're done."

Miranda smiled. "Thank you, Shepard." As the commander walked away, Miranda turned to Liara and let out an uncharacteristic nervous breath. "Dr T'Soni. Thank you for being willing to speak to me. I know you have absolutely no reason to trust me, but I'm going to ask you something and I hope you will at least take time to consider it, rather than just shut me down without giving it any thought. I don't really know..." Miranda stopped speaking when Liara raised a hand in front of her, along with both eyebrow markings.

"Ms Lawson. I know we didn't get started on the best of terms, but we've both made it through some difficult times. I don't work with you, so I have no personal frame of reference to judge your current character." Miranda went to speak and Liara held her hand up again. "Please, let me finish... I trust Shepard implicitly, and whatever her reasons, she trusts you. That's good enough for me, so please, whatever your question is, just ask it."

Miranda stared at her for a couple of seconds, letting the words register, before shaking her head. "You are incredibly lucky, Dr T'Soni. Never in my life have I ever had someone in whom I could place such trust."

Liara smiled enigmatically, "That's where you're wrong. You have Shepard, and you know you can trust her with your life. There is nothing more precious."
Again, Miranda just stared and for a moment almost looked like she was going to cry, but swallowed hard, her emotions pushed to the background once more. "You're right. As amazed as I can possibly be at the bluntness of that statement, you're right. I can, and I do trust her."

After a brief pause, Miranda blinked and started again. "Right. So, my question. When this is over, I am confident I will not have a place within Cerberus. I no longer trust in the Illusive Man nor in his ideals. As the new Shadow Broker, I was hoping, perhaps, that you would have a place for someone of my considerable talents somewhere within your organization." She let out a huge breath, trying to relax now that the question was put forth.

Liara, on the other hand, drew a sharp breath of surprise. Being asked for a job by Miranda Lawson was nowhere on her scope and she was caught completely off guard. "I... well. I'll admit that is nothing of what I would have expected. I'll be honest. I don't have an answer for you. I will need to give that some rather careful consideration and, of course, discuss it with Shepard."

"Understood. And it's not like we don't have time. A couple of personal missions yet, collection of a Reaper IFF... and then there's always the relay run." Miranda tried to hide her concern at that last part, failed, and continued with a frown on her face. "Again, Doctor. Thank you for taking time to speak with me. I really do appreciate it. I will await your decision." With a quick nod, Miranda departed and went to speak with Jacob about potential upgrades.

Liara watched her go, her feelings about the woman a confused mess of old hatred fighting newfound respect and the trust Shepard was putting in her battling with the disdain Miranda had treated her with when she handed over Shepard's body. Her eyes still following Miranda's every move as she worked her way across the floor of Central Operations, Liara about jumped out of her skin when Shepard's hand landed on her shoulder. Shepard narrowed her eyes at Miranda, wondering what she had said that had Liara so distracted, then shook her head lightly and shrugged her shoulders in dismissal. She had better things to think about at the moment. She looked to Liara with a light smile on her lips. "Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

Liara's eyes lit up and she smiled in return as she reached out and took Shepard's hand. "Absolutely, Commander." She turned and quickly dragged the Commander down the hall to her private quarters.
Moments of Reflection

Chapter Notes

IFF - Identification of Friend or Foe
Sim're: "Sister of my sister, not intended for relations, refers to a dear friend's loved one
Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)
STG - Salarian Special Tactics Group

Miranda walked away from Dr T'Soni and focused on Jacob. Her thoughts, however, were far from
the mission and she wanted to bounce some things off her fellow Cerberus operative while outside of
the Normandy. As she approached, Garrus grumbled and stalked off. "This is a waste of our time.
There's nothing new here."

Miranda raised an eyebrow in question as she looked to Jacob. "What's wrong with Garrus? He
seems a bit on edge."

Jacob shrugged. "Not exactly sure, but I have a feeling it has something to do with Tali'Zorah. He
seemed excited before going down to Haestrom, not so much since they've been back. I think on the
original Normandy they were an item... before she went back to the Fleet and he became Archangel.
Life didn't work out the way he planned, I guess.

Miranda sighed. "I can relate."

Jacob nodded in agreement, "Yeah. I know what you mean." He gave Miranda a meaningful glance
as thoughts of their prior short affair ran through his mind.

Miranda actually looked repentant. "Yes. Well. I could have handled that better. And as I look back I
realize I could have handled a lot of things better." She paused and looked at her teammate. "Jacob.
What are your plans after the Omega-4 Relay?"

Jacob looked at her suspiciously, wondering if she was wanting to give a second go at their
relationship. He had no interest in treading that path again. "After? You honestly think there'll be an
after?"

Miranda decided to jump in with both feet and didn't hold anything back. Not like I have much to
lose at this point. "Jacob. God help me, but I honestly think Shepard's going to get us through this. It
might be completely crazy, but I believe in her." She shook her head. "I've not played my cards very
well and I've been rather narrow-minded and irresponsible. I've realized rather late in the game that I
inadvertently narrowed my future to a single career path... and I no longer like the road I'm on." She
looked him straight in the eye. "I'm not going back to the Illusive Man when this is over."

Jacob's head came up in surprise. "Really? Huh. You would have been the last person I would have
anticipated defecting. But don't worry. I won't rat you out." He laughed softly and continued.
"Damn, Miranda. I really am surprised, and I didn't think you'd ever surprise me. You've always
been so predictable. So...dedicated to the cause."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "Yes. But that was when the cause was well defined. I just feel somewhere
along the way it went from the betterment of humanity to the betterment of Cerberus. I no longer
trust in the organizational goals."

Jacob snorted. "You mean you no longer trust the Illusive Man."

Miranda's eyes got sharp and her tone biting. "Exactly. Especially after this last little fiasco."

"Yeah, well. Not sure what I'm doing after, but I'm not going back either. Shepard's my boss now. The Illusive Man doesn't get to hang me out to dry more than once, but I told him that from the start. Not gonna give him a chance for a repeat performance." Jacob shrugged his shoulders. "Depending on how it all works out, I might even go back to the Alliance. I'm sure they'll take me if Shepard puts in a good word."

After letting out a heavy sigh, Miranda suddenly exclaimed, "God. I need a drink."

Jacob let out a hardy laugh. "There's a bar in the living area. I've already been there." He smiled as he continued, pointing in the general direction. "Passageway on the left, past the kitchen, first hall to the right. About mid ship. Can't miss it. I'm sure you'll have company. The commandos hang out there when they take their breaks." Jacob was relieved when Miranda did not ask him to accompany her.

Miranda wandered away and found the bar easy enough. Jacob was right; couldn't miss it. The commandos were having a good time and all Miranda had to do was follow the noise. There were a number of games scattered around the edges of the rooms, seeming to cater to everyone. Made sense, since the past Broker recruited from practically every race in the galaxy. It gave each member of the team a taste of home. They even had a dart board and a pool table. It was a shame it was all going to crash and burn into Hagalaz to keep it out of the hands of the Illusive Man. Miranda couldn't argue with the logic, but perhaps before that happened they could steal the card table and install it in the lounge on the Normandy. She headed straight to the bar and ordered a drink, asking how much. The Asari tending bar laughed. "You can tip me with a kiss if your drink comes out ok, because I'm not a professional barkeep, but other than that, the drinks are on the house. You only pay if you get drunk and do something stupid. Broker benefits for being locked on a ship in the middle of nowhere."

Miranda chuckled. "In that case, I'll make it easy. Whiskey, on the rocks."

The Asari made a face and poured a tumbler. "Goddess. I don't know how Humans drink that stuff. Just the smell almost makes me gag." She shoved the glass to Miranda with a look of distaste.

Miranda picked up the glass and smiled. "You don't drink it, you sip it. And you don't like it because it doesn't have either eezo or sugar. It's just different than what you're used to." She took her whiskey and found a small table in the corner of the room and sat down, swirling the glass just to hear the click of the ice against the side. She stared through the amber brown liquid, occasionally taking a sip, and just thought about what she'd do if Liara decided she didn't fit into the Shadow Broker's plans. Just as she was deciding that she didn't really have many options where the Illusive Man couldn't easily hunt her down and have her assassinated, a pair of distinctive white and gray commando leathers moved into her peripheral vision and a familiar voice asked, "May I join you?"

"Certainly. I don't mind sharing a table. I didn't realize the place was getting full." Miranda glanced up and realized there were many empty tables yet available. "Oh... I guess that's not the case."

Judea smiled. "No, it's not. Is it wrong to want to sit with a beautiful woman who seems to have a lot on her mind? And who might need a friend to act as a sounding board?"
As he stalked off, Garrus contemplated where he might go. Tali was on the Broker ship working with Feron, and Garrus didn't want to risk running into her in the more relaxed, casual setting between missions. He wasn't sure yet exactly what to think about her relationship with Kal'Reegar. He and Tali had talked, but they hadn't talked about THAT. His mind slipped back in time to the original Normandy. Being the only two dextro-based life forms on board, he and Tali had spent a lot of time together at meal time, cooking and sharing their special meals, and had become quite close. Garrus felt they had come to an unspoken arrangement, though neither was ever so forward as to actually refer to the other as a boyfriend or girlfriend. He remembered the time on Feros like it was yesterday, when Tali had been taken down by a Geth Prime and suffered a severe suit breach along with a gunshot wound. Every step seemed to take forever as he rushed back to the Normandy, carrying her unconscious form in his arms while Ashley Williams provided cover fire. He had thought he was going to lose her that day, yet he still didn't have the courage to tell her how he felt.

He looked around and realized he had wandered all the way back to the docking bay without even realizing it. He knew Tali and Feron were here somewhere working to adapt the barrier technology for the future Broker platforms, so promptly turned around and worked his way back to the Operations Center; he still had work to do. While walking the length of the ship for a second time, his mind wandered some more. First, his thoughts touched on Virmire and how guilty he felt when he was relieved that Kaidan was selected to prep the nuke, and not Tali. It wasn't that he was glad Kaidan had died, but he couldn't be sorry that Tali had lived. With her technical knowledge, it might very well have been Tali that died in the explosion instead of Alenko. Even though Garrus and Tali both made it safely back on the ship that day, they had lost a friend and as they held one another for comfort that night, it seemed an inappropriate time for either one of them to share the potentially deeper feelings in their hearts. It never occurred to Garrus that it was possibly just the social nature of the Quarian people and that Tali felt nothing more than a close friendship with the Turian.

When the war was over, Garrus thought things might actually take a turn in the right direction. Then, the original Normandy was destroyed and Tali had opted to return to the Migrant Fleet and close out her pilgrimage; staying around the Normandy crew had been too painful a reminder for Tali to bear. Again, Garrus had said nothing and Tali simply walked out of his life. The next two years had been a whirlwind as he buried himself in his work with Liara and the House T'Soni commandos in their hunt for Shepard... until the fateful day on Omega when Liara decided to hand Shepard's body over to Cerberus. Then Garrus turned his frustrations against the riff-raff of Omega and built a crime-fighting team, only to have it destroyed by a traitor he had yet to find; a fellow Turian by the name of Lantar Sidonis. He thought of Tali frequently during those days, but he never reached out to her. He didn't reach out to anyone, because he was too embarrassed by what had transpired... both for abandoning Liara and Shepard, and then not seeing Sidonis for what the bastard was and getting Garrus' whole team wiped out. He shook his head when he realized what a fool he had been. Now, he stood once more in the Operations Center and realized he could never interfere with Tali's happiness. And if she has found that with Kal'Reegar, then so be it. One thing I can fix, though, is to find Lantar Sidonis and erase the stain he left on the quality of Turian character.

Much more focused than he was before his walk, Garrus got to work searching the Shadow Broker databases. He knew Shepard was getting close to leading the Normandy through the Omega-4 Relay, and while he may not be able to find a direction for his personal life before then, Garrus was committed to at least cleaning up the last of his screwed up business dealings. With a final shake of his head and a bit of new-found determination, he headed to the terminal containing the entire collection of Shadow Broker dossiers and started digging.

Liara practically dragged Shepard into her private quarters, then spun and kissed her with great enthusiasm before the door was even completely closed. "I am very happy to see you uninjured,
Siame. You must tell me how it all went."

The commander filled her in on the Collector vessel and that it actually had been a trap and that TIM had known all along. She shook her head and sighed. "I think I'm starting to get tired, Li. My patience is definitely lacking. First, hanging up on the Council, and now ripping into TIM. If I'm not careful, we won't have any allies left."

She rotated her shoulders in an attempt to loosen tense muscles and let out a deep sigh before plopping down into a chair and finishing her account of the conversation with TIM. "So, Tali is passing on the schematics for the new barrier system, then going to have Feron help her data mine for anything they can find on the derelict Reaper and this IFF. Miranda may help them, because she's starting to run into roadblocks in Cerberus channels. We think TIM is slowly removing her access to the more sensitive projects. I think he's realized she's supporting us now, so she's no longer his golden child. And Garrus is hitting up the personnel dossiers, trying to get a trace on both Sidonis and Thane's son. There's so much yet to do and I feel like we're running out of time."

The commander leaned forward and placed her elbows on her knees and rubbed her head briefly, before just sitting still with her forehead resting on her hands. Liara looked at her with concern, her initial reasons for wanting Samantha somewhere private falling to the wayside. "Shepard? Have you eaten or slept since you woke up in the med bay on the Normandy?"

"What?" The commander didn't move, but sounded honestly confused by the sudden change of topic from business to personal matters.

Liara huffed. "You haven't, have you?" She moved over behind Samantha's chair, typing a quick message on her omnitool as she walked, and then pulled Shepard upright in the chair and started to massage her shoulders, neck and chest. "First things first, then. Food. Rest. Then discussion. You're exhausted." Shepard sat there, eyes closed, leaned her head back against Liara's stomach and offered no protest. It wasn't long before the door chimed and Liara grabbed Shepard's hand and made her get up to move to a small corner table. She then went to the door and let Arlyna in. She had brought three package meals and they all sat down together and ate.

Shepard asked Arlyna how she was settling in and if she could see doing it for the duration of the Reaper war. Arlyna was serious when she answered. "I have found a place here easily enough but I don't know, Sim're. It will depend on the war. From what we have found in the databanks thus far, the Protheans took centuries to be defeated. I honestly do not know if I have the fortitude for a three-hundred year war. Not that any of us will really have any choice in the matter."

Shepard offered up a tired smile. "Then we need to find a way to win it quicker than that, don't we? We can't have you quitting on us because you get bored."

Arlyna looked surprised and Liara laughed as she followed up. "Welcome to the world of the eternal optimist."

As they finished up their meals, Arlyna gave a knowing nod to Liara and tipped her head toward Shepard. With a full stomach and no sleep for two days, the commander was fighting a losing battle to stay awake. Arlyna slipped out quietly with an assurance from Liara that she could handle the commander. Liara leaned down and gently tucked some loose hair up behind Samantha's ear before kissing her softly on the forehead. "Samantha." Liara whispered. "Come to bed, love."

"Hmm?" The commander's eyes cracked open and she got a bashful smile on her face. "Probably a good idea, before I fall asleep sitting right here, huh?" She blinked a few times and stood, still half asleep and somewhat unsteady on her feet. Liara took a hold of her arm to steady her and led her to the bedroom, helped her get undressed and into bed. Shepard mumbled, "Guess I was more tired
Liara slipped in next to her and shook her head. "It's no wonder. You never let yourself rest, and you never let your body heal completely before jumping into the next fight. Just look at you." Propped up on an elbow, a finger tip on Liara's free hand traced Samantha's marred skin. "When you came back to me, all your previous scars were gone. Now, you have a new battle map on your body." Her finger traced down a jagged slash on Samantha's right side and hip. "I know you got this on Omega, from charging that Krogan on your way to dispense the cure for the plague." Her hand moved to the opposite shoulder. "And you always lead with your left... so all these impacts..." Her finger teased over multiple small scars from various calibers, scattered across her left shoulder and side. "... are from when you are approaching the enemy. You always wait too long to duck when your shields start to fail." Liara frowned and shook her head. "Already so many, Samantha, and the war has barely begun."

Shepard's eyes were closed, but she smiled as she whispered, "You've seen me fight, Blue. You know those small caliber weapons are more an annoyance than anything. And those are all from getting Garrus off Omega and Jack out of Purgatory. Nothing like having an entire station trying to kill you. Twice. Great practice for the Collector ship and totally worth it."

Liara lifted Shepard's right arm and pressed her lips to a long gash. "And what of this on your forearm?"

Shepard chuckled quietly. "That one made me think of you. I charged in to a group of Hock's security, and there were more of them around the corner that I didn't see until too late. Ended up in a serious melee. Made me think of the time you smacked me on the back of my helmet for not paying attention."

Liara tried unsuccessfully to appear angry. "That is because you are often reckless, Commander. You need to set the example, but preferably a good one." Liara shook her head and sat up. "Now. Roll over onto your stomach and I will give you a massage."

Shepard smiled and grunted as she flopped over. "Not gonna turn down an offer like that."

Liara ran her hands lightly across Shepard's shoulders, letting her biotics flare gently to provide warmth and vibration without putting any heavy physical pressure on the commander's back. Her fingers glanced over Shepard's biotic implant at the base of her skull. "Does this hurt you at all?" Liara frowned as her fingers trailed down the remnants of a pseudo-electrical burn that ran from the implant halfway down Shepard's spine from the overload caused by Object Rho.

Shepard didn't answer the question, but tensed at the reminder of the mental invasion. "Liara." The Asari could feel the turmoil in Shepard's mind as easily as the sudden resurgence of tension in the commander's muscles as she continued. "If anything ever gets into my head... you can't hesitate. Promise me."

The implication of what Shepard was saying made Liara's chest ache and she found it hard to draw breath as memories of her mother's death suddenly flashed through her mind. "No. I won't." Angry tears slipped down her face as she shook her head. "You cannot ask me to promise such a thing, Siame." Shepard went to turn over, but Liara held her in place as she continued speaking. "No. You are asking me to commit suicide, because I would not survive without you, especially knowing I was the one to pull the trigger. I will do anything for you but that... and I will not give you a false promise I would have no intention of keeping. Could you promise such a thing to me?"

Shepard sighed and tried in vain to relax again, the fear still clawing at her conscience. "No. I couldn't. It just... scares me, Li. To think of the damage I could do if they manage it."
Liara suddenly smiled, struck by a flash of insight. "Shepard. They will not be fighting just you. We have always said that together we can accomplish anything. I will not break faith with that now, or ever. When the time comes, I will be with you. I will turn the Aletheia over to someone and join you on the Normandy. We will guard each other's thoughts through the link and they will not conquer our combined minds."

Liara felt Samantha relax slightly under her touch and she resumed her massage as the commander spoke, an answering smile in her voice. "I like the sound of that, Dr T'Soni. Speaking of which, who are you thinking of, besides Feron?"

"Riana acted as my assistant on Illium, after Nyxeris, but I doubt I could get her to forego her position as First. So, when I join the Normandy, you get her as well." Liara started just thinking out loud. "Arlyna is very quick, and has proven exceptionally adept at filtering data and finding critical information. I was already thinking of placing her and Niria on the Chiroquol. We also need someone much better at financials. I was thinking of elevating one of the agents..."

Shepard laughed. "Barla Von."

Liara smirked. "Exactly! But I don't think I want him as a primary, so I'll put him with Arlyna and of course, Niria. I know you trust them completely, so I'll trust them to keep him under control. For the same reason, I'll put Livos Tanni with Feron. And, I'll talk with Livos to see how she recommends splitting the team across the three ships. As soon as she gives me an answer, we can launch the Rakhana and see if this is even going to work."

"Don't you need Feron to outfit the other two ships?" Shepard's voice was getting drowsy again and Liara smiled as she answered.

"Yes, but I want to make sure the prototype works like it's supposed to, first, so we don't repeat some error twice more and have to fix them all." Liara's smile faded. "Plus, if we have at least one functional platform out there operating, we can depart at any time if Cerberus acts faster than we expect."

"Hmmm." Shepard was almost asleep. "Good point. But that still doesn't answer who you will trust the Aletheia too."

"Well, obviously, Judea will stay on board, along with whichever two commandos Livos wants with her. So, we just need the info broker." Liara paused as she turned the recent addition to the prospect list over in her head. "What do you think about Miranda Lawson?"

Before Liara could react, Shepard snapped awake and flipped to her back, staring up at the Asari as if she'd gone mad; all thoughts of the massage or sleep gone. "What? I thought you hated her?"

"That's what she wanted to talk to me about earlier. She voiced her objections about continuing to work with Cerberus and the Illusive Man when the Collector war is finished. She asked me for a job within the network." Liara shrugged her shoulders as she took in Shepard's shock. "I know. Hate is a strong word... and that certainly used to be the case. So I surprise myself by even thinking about it, but you trust her. With your life. Goddess knows why, but because of that, I'm willing to give her a chance."

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Miranda blushed lightly at Judea's appraisal. "That obvious?"

Judea's laugh was more of just a short 'huh' that made it seem like she didn't laugh much, but it was
more because she was very focused on the woman in front of her. "The fact that you're beautiful? Yes. Very. But you're also looking at that glass very seriously, and every once in a while you've looked like you wanted to throw it across the room." Judea canted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes in thought. The warrior Miranda was a woman to be reckoned with; a strong biotic propelled by an even stronger personality, but the contemplative Miranda? That Miranda had a vulnerable aspect that softened her features and made her... very alluring. "The times we've worked together, I've never seen you like this... Disturbed. Pensive. Even when Oriana was in trouble. I have to wonder what could bother you enough to make you so lost in thought."

Miranda was tired. She didn't know if it was just the long mission, the nature of the mission or the whiskey. Most likely some combination of all three, but she respected Judea's abilities and found herself talking to the Asari like a long lost friend. "With Oriana, I knew what I had to do. Now, not so much." Miranda looked up at Judea, "I mean no offense... this is just a hypothetical question, but what would you have done if they had found Matriarch Benezia hadn't been indoctrinated? That she had switched sides and decided to work with Saren voluntarily?"

Judea looked scandalized. "Goddess. What a horrid thought. I... I guess I would ... I don't know. I would have to call into question all my years of service to House T'Soni, wondering how I could have possibly been so blind as to not see she would take the wrong path. Had I known, I would have no honor left to me when she died if I had made no attempt to correct her error...or my lack of judgment. Why would you ask such a thing?"

Miranda closed her eyes as she answered. "Because that is where I find myself. The Illusive Man is not who I thought he was, and before him was my father, who is also concerned only with his own legacy of influence and power. Seems I've made a habit of following the wrong people." She jumped when she felt a warm hand contact hers against her glass.

"You have no choice as to who your father is and as soon as you were old enough, you left him. I know not who this Illusive Man was when you started working for him, but it seems to me that once someone pointed out the error of his current path, you are contemplating a way to fix it. And I doubt very much anyone would say the person you are currently following is a wrong choice. What about that has you so pensive?"

Miranda stared at the warm, almost-violet hand laid on top of hers as she spoke. "I am thinking of the Illusive Man, not Shepard, but I am not contemplating fixing his path, I am contemplating changing mine." Her eyes came up to Judea's, and it suddenly struck Miranda she had never looked into the commando's eyes. They were a striking gold, inlaid on a light morning blue face hinting toward violet. Her face paint was white, in somewhat stark contrast to the blue, but accented by her mostly white commando leathers. All together, it was a captivating combination. Miranda shook her head. Captivating? That has to be the whiskey talking.

Judea spoke conspiratorially, leaning in close to Miranda and lowering her voice to a near whisper. "Change is good, especially when it corrects an error in direction. If you are contemplating shifting loyalty from this Illusive Man to Commander Shepard, I would highly encourage such a transition." She also gently rubbed Miranda's hand with soft and soothing strokes.

Miranda actually laughed. "Oh. That happened a while back, whether I was ready to do so or not. No. Now I'm looking to my future, for when we are done with this mission. Shepard will return to the Alliance, and I cannot follow her there. I have asked Dr T'Soni if I could work for her... in some capacity in her role as Shadow Broker."

Judea's eyes went wide at the prospect of Miranda Lawson joining their team. "Only a select group knows that Liara is actually the Broker." She paused for a moment thinking how she wanted to
proceed. "But I feel it may already be too large. There are eleven of us and then the entire Normandy crew. The Cerberus crew." Judea studied Miranda's face for the reaction to her last statement.

Miranda adamantly shook her head. "No, not the entire Normandy crew. Well, let me restate that. Yes, the whole crew knows, but only about the Broker ship. Only the trusted members of the ground team know the future plans for the triad. We are keeping that tight lipped so the Illusive Man won't find out."

Judea sat back and closed her eyes, breathing a sigh of relief. "So, less than two dozen. That is not so bad, when at least twelve will remain a part of the network once the shift is made to the triad and all the others are within Shepard's trusted."

Miranda grimaced, not only at Judea's statement, but at the realization that she missed Judea's warm touch on her hand. "So you have a dozen trusted agents within the commandos, and only need a dozen to crew the ships. That doesn't bode well for my placement within the new organization, does it?"

Judea shrugged. "The Aletheia is a large ship and needs three crew to operate at peak efficiency. I would think it would have maybe six or seven on the main node, instead of only four, with me as pilot and Riana as Liara's First. That creates two slots to fill. Full up it can handle thirteen, but the equipment will take room, though I think they are converting part of the cargo hold for that. Still. I do not believe Liara would want a crew that large. It would take additional supplies at a time when such resources will most likely be scarce. Besides, we are commandos, not information analysts. I would think she could use someone of your intellect."

Miranda smiled. "Good. That sounds a bit more promising then. So, are you definitely piloting the Aletheia?"

"I would think so, but I will go wherever the Lady T'Soni needs me. I am hers to command." At first, Judea seemed willing to accept whatever Liara assigned her, but then she suddenly added a qualifier. "Though, I will admit, if you join the team I would like the opportunity to serve on the same ship..." Judea's face turned a bit more violet than blue in color and she looked down at the table. "...as you."

Miranda suddenly sat forward and stared at the commando. "Wait. What? Why?"

Judea smiled softly. "Perhaps, Ms Lawson, we should continue this discussion in private."

Miranda looked at the commando in a new light, with the realization that the commando was offering more than just comfort to a friend. Her internal debate didn't take long. I did talk about changing paths, and it wouldn't be the first time I've ever been with a woman... though technically she's not a woman. Miranda almost laughed at the oddity of that statement. She's not a woman. She shook her head slightly and smiled as she answered. "Yes, I think perhaps maybe we should."

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When Shepard recovered from her astonishment, she smirked. "Well, Miranda certainly has the intellect for the job and I do trust her. She's definitely not TIM's lackey anymore. You could certainly do worse."

Liara reclined next to Shepard and snuggled into the commander's shoulder. "Good. Then it's settled. When you return through the relay, Feron, Arlyna and Miranda will take over the network. We can convert Miranda's office to a fourth node that Riana and I can operate from, to stay connected to the information flow. I'll speak to Feron about getting the additional set of equipment."
Shepard frowned. "It's not settled yet. We still have other considerations... like me having to turn myself, and the Normandy, in to the Alliance."

Liara thumped her lover gently on the stomach. "That is not a given, Commander. We'll talk about that when you get back. Because the new Normandy is not their ship, nor is it staffed by Alliance crew, other than Karin."

"And Gabby and Ken and Joker..." Shepard raised her eyebrows at Liara's forcefulness.

"Who have all left the Alliance. If anything, they are probably considered traitors, much like you would be if not for your Spectre status." Liara wasn't giving an inch and, unfortunately, her arguments had a lot of merit.

Shepard sighed tiredly, her heart not really into debating the Asari intellect. Shepard knew she would lose, eventually. "It will be a Council ship if I confiscate it under my Spectre status... and I'll use my Spectre status to grant them immunity."

She was surprised when Liara kissed her gently on the cheek. "That might actually work. As long as they don't charge you with terrorism for Bahak and revoke your status."

"Huh. Yeah. There is that. And now I suppose you expect me to sleep with that hanging over my head?" Shepard chuckled, though there wasn't really a lot of humor in the sound. Liara could tell it was forced.

"Just focus on the Collectors, Shepard. Come back from that safe and we'll figure the rest out later. But know that one way or another, I will be with you. If I have to get an apartment in London and all we do is talk through our link, you will not be without me." Liara kissed her again, but this time a blue hand pulled the commander's chin over to place the kiss on welcoming lips. That same hand caressed Samantha's cheek as the Asari whispered soothingly, "Sleep, Love. We'll talk again when you wake."

Once the commander was in a deep sleep, which actually didn't take very long once they quit talking, Liara got up and slipped out to speak with Feron, Livos and Miranda. Feron and Livos were easy to find and plans were soon in motion. Miranda, however, was nowhere to be found. So, before returning to her room, Liara sent her a message that she would like to speak with her again, at the operative's convenience, sometime before the Normandy departed Hagalaz.

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When they stepped into Judea's room, Miranda was pleasantly surprised. She expected there to be either two or four commandos to a room, but Judea had private quarters. Judea explained since she was Liara's personal pilot, she had her own quarters, as did Riana, because they had to be available at any hour, day or night, on a moment's notice and did not want to disturb any other commando's rest cycle in the event of an off-hour call. The commando offered her a seat on the couch before getting two bottles of water, handing one to Miranda. "I assume we want to stay sober for this conversation?"

Miranda laughed and nodded. "Yes, I think that's probably best."

"So, Ms Lawson. I would think with your acceptance to speak in private, I can safely assume you did not take offense at my forwardness." Judea sat quietly and took a sip of her water. "Either that or you are extremely courteous and chose not to embarrass me in public with an open refusal."

Miranda placed her water on a side table and folded her hands nervously in her lap. "No offense,
certainly. Though I am somewhat surprised." At the look on Judea's face, she felt the need to elaborate. "Not at your interest, but at my own. Please don't take that the wrong way, but given my background and who I have worked with for the majority of my life, I am surprised that I can even entertain the thought of a non-human being attractive to me, in that way." Miranda flinched at her own words. "God, that sounds dreadful."

Judea actually laughed. "On the contrary, Ms Lawson. To me, it indicates two things. First, I believe you are confessing that you actually do find me attractive, which is a good start. Second, it is just more evidence that you do not belong in an organization such as Cerberus."

"Well, yes, I suppose it does. But I don't believe 'attractive' is the right word." Miranda smiled at the expression on Judea's face. "I believe the word that flitted through my brain was captivating."

As Judea's face turned a dark purple, Miranda laughed. "For being such a competent commando, you seem to blush easily... and you seem young, but I can't judge Asari ages worth a damn. I hope I haven't just offended you. But, I'll go first, so you don't feel so bad. First off, please call me Miranda. Ms Lawson makes me feel old, and I'm only thirty-six. Or at least I will be, in a few months, in May, on the Earth calendar... and I suppose all those details are completely irrelevant. Sorry. I have a tendency to do that. Be much too specific, that is. I do it to poor Shepard all the time."

Judea shook her head in bewilderment. "The differences in our cultures are so vast. At thirty-six, I was still in primary school. We don't even normally go to University until fifty-five or sixty and I didn't become a commando until I was eighty-seven. Now, I'm two hundred ninety three and still a maiden. If I had stayed as an active commando instead of going to pilot training, I'd be a squad leader, eligible for captain in another fifty years or so. But I didn't, so I'm not. And I absolutely love flying, so I have no regrets."

Miranda frowned. "I wish I could say the same, about no regrets." She looked up and caught Judea's eyes again and her frown disappeared. "But I'm going to change all that and not add any more to the list." She reached out tentatively and took Judea's hand. "And I'd like to start by saying yes to you."

"I am glad... Miranda." Judea blushed again, but only lightly this time. "Would you be willing to... meld... with me?"

Miranda's eyes flew wide. "Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't think... Ahh." She shook her head. "I'd like to do this right, and kind of take things... slower?" She squirmed a bit on the couch and stared down at their joined hands, hoping she didn't just insult the Asari... again.

Judea rolled her eyes. "I didn't mean THAT kind of meld. I mean like a simple knowledge meld, as in a 'between friends' kind of meld. Just to share feelings and maybe some history." Judea laughed at Miranda's embarrassment. "What is it about Humans that makes you think all we want to do is jump into bed with you?"

"Oh God. I'm sorry. I didn't think. Of course I know there are different kinds of melds! Otherwise, Shepard and Dr.... " Miranda turned a rather deep shade of pink and just stopped talking. She tried to pull back her hand, but Judea wouldn't let go of it.

Now Judea really laughed. "Well, they do have a lot of sex, but I think I would too if I saw my promised that infrequently... and had two years to make up for. But that's beside the point." It was Judea's turn to shake her head. "And for being so forceful and adventuresome, you Human's are amazingly uptight about your sexuality and what you consider appropriate."

Miranda smiled and relaxed, "Just with people we don't know well. So... I guess we need to get to know one another." Miranda took a deep breath and blew it out quickly. "Obviously, I've never
melded before, so... just... talk me through."

After a few false starts and roadblocks, Judea was finally able to establish a connection and showed Miranda the coastal city of Dassus, where she grew up. It was an early maritime trade center that progressed from building sailboats to building the first Asari interstellar vessel, the *Maiden Voyage*. As such, space travel was a huge industry and a large number of the residents in more recent times either built ships or flew them; many did both. Judea had known since the age of twenty that she was going to be a pilot. Miranda had more difficulty opening up, but finally managed to show Judea the Lawson private estate outside of Canberra, Australia, on the shores of Lake Bathurst. Judea was amazed at the torrent of emotions that flowed with the images Miranda showed her. The resentment, pain and loneliness were a sharp contrast to the beauty and serenity of the setting. There were tears in the Asari's eyes when she dropped the meld. Miranda scowled. "I'll not have your pity, Judea."

"I do not pity you, Miranda. I am amazed by you. That you developed the strength and tenacity to overcome such odds to mature into who you have become. But it still makes me sad that anyone would be subjected to such a childhood. No child should have to endure the pain of being told by a parent they are a disappointment. It is just cruel. The Asari are no different. We are not exempt from, nor immune to, such negative emotions." The pilot shook her head. "But, it made you who you are and put you here with me today, so I will not pity you nor wish it had been any different for you, or we may not have met. And for that, I am glad."

"Sorry. I also have a tendency to be a bit defensive. I have a hard time... trusting. But working with Shepard, I'm beginning to realize there are some people out there who are worthy of it." Miranda smiled. "Thank you, for that. The experience was both amazing and enlightening. I am beginning to understand why Shepard and Liara work so well together. It's almost as if you are the other person for a while. I imagine you do that often enough, you get a pretty good idea how your partner will react to just about anything."

Judea agreed. "Yes. Asari partners certainly develop closer relationships than most other species are capable of, but the relationship between Liara and the commander is unusually strong." Judea squeezed Miranda's hand. "Full partners rarely have any secrets from one another, especially once they have experienced a full union. I am glad to already know your history. I would think it is the hardest thing for you to share. Thank you."

Miranda smiled. "Generally, yes, but you knew some of it already, because of Oriana, so it wasn't actually as difficult as I thought it would be. Because of that mission, I respect your abilities and your discretion. It goes a long way towards my ability to trust you."

Miranda's omnitool blinked with the incoming message from Liara. "Well. It's Dr T'Soni. She wants to see me before the Normandy departs. She doesn't waste any time, does she?"

"No. She is generally very decisive. I guess you should go, then." Judea grinned. "After you depart Hagalaz, talk to the commander on how best to get in touch with me."

As Miranda typed a quick message back to Liara that she would meet her in Central Operations, she tipped her head in question to Judea. "Shepard? It makes me very curious as to why you would say that. Why should I speak to her?"

Judea's eyes lit up. "Well, I'm sure you're not ready for the Illusive Man to know you're dating one of Dr T'Soni's commandos... and I'd lay odds that the commander has a direct secure line to the Broker." Judea said nothing about the STG burst transmitter. She would leave that to Shepard to reveal, if she decided to.

"Ah. Good point." They stood together and Judea walked her to the door. "Thank you, Judea. My
ruminations over what my future may hold turned out better than I ever imagined.” Miranda cast an open smile at the Asari before her.

"Believe me, Miranda. The pleasure was mine. I have been admiring you at a distance since we met, after working with you the first time when we recruited Justicar Samara. I never thought this opportunity would arise, so I tried to ignore my desire. When you mentioned asking Lady T'Soni for a job... well. Let's just say I didn't see the point of forcing myself to stay away anymore."

"I'm glad." As Miranda turned to leave, she stopped and grabbed Judea's hand. "Come with me to Central Operations, so you can hear the news as well. You might as well know up front how difficult this may be."

Judea smiled. "I'd hope to find out how easy it's going to be."

Miranda entered Central Operations and immediately went to Dr T'Soni's desk. While Liara appreciated the cool professionalism with which the operative received the news, she still saw the excitement and relief dancing in Lawson's eyes. As before, Liara watched the operative walk away but was curious when instead of leaving, Miranda went directly to Judea Voni. That, in and of itself, was nothing terribly irregular, but the quick clasp of Judea's hands onto Lawson's upper arms followed by a quick kiss to the cheek certainly got Liara's attention. She entertained a light smile as she turned away to return to her room and to Shepard. *Well, Miranda Lawson. There may be hope for you yet.*

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Shepard seemed sound asleep when Liara returned, so the Asari quickly disrobed and slid in next to her lover. Ever vigilant, Shepard clamped down on the wrist of the arm that was encircling her and spun on her attacker, only to see a pair of shocked blue eyes staring at her, accompanied by a startled exclamation. "Samantha! It's just me!"

Shepard frowned and narrowed her eyes, breathing rapidly with a rush of adrenalin coursing through her. Recognizing the voice, she stopped and blinked a couple of times, fully waking before she spoke. "Gods, Liara... I'm sorry!" She changed her grip on Liara's arm and pulled it toward her, looking to see if she had left any marks on her wrist. Seeing nothing, she gently kissed the inside of the Asari's wrist in apology. "Damn it. I hope that doesn't bruise later. Sorry, Blue. I was...dreaming."

Liara's brow furrowed in concern. "Nightmares, Shepard?"

Shepard flopped flat and closed her eyes as she swallowed. "Yeah. Aratoht."

Liara sighed sadly. "With you, I guess that's to be expected. First it's the beacon, then getting spaced, and now this." She cuddled into Shepard's shoulder. "I wish there was something I could do to help."

Shepard pressed an affectionate kiss on the top of Liara's crest. "I don't typically have them when we're together. It's unusual."

Liara groaned, "My fault. I snuck out to talk to Feron, Livos and Miranda. I was just coming back to bed."

Shepard gave her a squeeze and laughed lightly. "Me having nightmares is not your fault. Don't be silly. You just might want to peek in through the link first next time, to make sure it's safe."

Liara was aghast. "Shepard! Never would I do so without your permission first! That is a grave
taboo in our society, to meld without explicit consent..."

Shepard cut her off with a soft chuckle. "Blue, you're in my head every minute we're in the same system because of the link anyway, but if you need explicit consent, I give it to you. Here and now. You never need to ask. I have no secrets from you."

Liara was dead silent for a few moments as she sat up and stared at Shepard in shocked astonishment. "Just because the link exists does not mean I am actively looking and perusing your every thought. Do you truly have any idea what you are offering me, Shepard? How precious a gift that is in Asari society?"

Samantha smiled up at her. "Liara. Siame. We are one. We share Inanna. You are my heart and soul. I know you would never abuse the privilege, so I trust you." Her smile faded. "Especially if it involves your safety. I would never forgive myself if I hurt you; having a nightmare is no excuse. If you consider it a gift, then accept this gift from me. Please."

Tears streamed from Liara's eyes as she mumbled, "Oh, Shepard!" and leaned forward and kissed Samantha lovingly on the lips. She sniffed and snuggled back in tightly to her favorite little shoulder nook, hugging Sam close to her. "I love you, Siame. Unto Eternity."
She woke, stretched out flat on her back and stared towards the ceiling; even with her enhanced vision she could barely see it in the early morning darkness. Shepard smiled. She had to give Liara credit. One of the first changes she made was to program natural light cycles on the Broker ship to match the Thessian daily cycle. It was a nice touch. If she didn't think about it and had the exterior shutters closed, she could almost forget they were in the middle of a volatile electrical storm, riding on the edge of destruction... especially under the circumstances in which the commander found herself. Liara was in her favorite spot, snuggled comfortably against Sam's right side with one hand nestled happily between the commander's breasts over a steadily beating heart and one leg cast over a muscular right thigh, with bent knee and a foot curled back to rest against Sam's calf. *I'm glad Liara doesn't have cold feet!* Shepard grinned happily as the thought rattle across her mind. Liara's breathing was smooth and rhythmic and her body temperature was slightly elevated, so Samantha knew the Asari was still sleeping soundly following their late-night lovemaking. Shepard rolled her head to the side and pressed her lips softly to the scalp crests of her lover as she breathed in Liara's comforting scent.

With the Omega-4 Relay trip looming sometime in the not too distant future, Shepard counted herself lucky to have gotten the six hours of uninterrupted sleep that she did. Normally, she either woke up to a nightmare or with contingency plans running rampant in her mind. Liara provided a calming influence on her psyche and having the Asari stretched out beside her helped her garner some much needed rest. Liara's presence also sent her mind back over the path of their relationship, to think about the risks she had taken and the pain she had caused her precious Blue. Her heart ached, knowing that such pain was most likely far from being over, running straight at danger being completely unavoidable as an Alliance Vanguard and Council Spectre. Shepard subconsciously tightened her grip and unintentionally disturbed Liara's previously peaceful rest. Liara groaned quietly and a knowing drowsy voice questioned, "What's the matter? Can't sleep?"

Shepard sighed, chastising herself, and spoke quietly into the slowly arriving dawn. "Sorry, Love. I didn't mean to wake you." She gave her lover a purposeful hug and another kiss on her crests. "Just thinking about everything I've put you through on our journey to now and trying to figure out how to do better this time around."

Liara's hand massaged Shepard's chest over her heart. Her voice was tight with uncensored concern as a tear rolled down her cheek and she beseechingly breathed out the first thing that came to her mind. "Don't die."

Shepard jerked in shock at the blunt response and had no words to counter the demand, the realization causing her heart to do a painful flip in her chest. She slowly rolled up on her side and faced Liara, placed her left hand under the Asari's chin and resolutely pulled her head up so they could look into one another's eyes. She leaned in and put all the emotion the response called forth into a single kiss aimed at the blue lips in front of her as she wrapped her arms tightly around her love and pulled her close. Their bodies moved together with practiced ease, fitting perfectly together
Shepard continued to hold Liara close after the kiss ended, running her fingertips soothingly over her lover's back. After a while, the anxiety eased and Liara slowly took in and let out a deep cleansing breath. "Goddess. I'm sorry, Samantha. That was... uncalled for. I understand the risks and I know you can't promise anything."

The soothing hand continued its motions. "No. Don't apologize for the way you feel. Especially for that, because I'm in complete agreement. I know who they are now. Know what they're capable of. There won't be any surprises from them this time. This time we meet them on our terms." Shepard's voice turned to ice and Liara shuddered as the commander finished. There was no doubting her resolve. "This time... they die."

Her temperament thawed as quickly as it had frozen and Samantha's breath tickled the crest folds on the side of Liara's head as her voice returned to its normal smooth alto and slid like quiet silk across her lover's ear. "And then, I'm coming home to you."

The brief hunt through the Broker archives had revealed some critical data, all of it pointing at the Citadel as their next destination. For Garrus, there was a C-Sec lead to a forger named Fade, responsible for helping many people disappear with a new identity. One of Fade's clients was formerly known as Lantar Sidonis. For Thane, despite his best efforts to keep his son away from his career as an assassin, a certain Kolyat Krios had shown up on the Citadel and taken on a contract as a hit-man. Thane wanted to get there before the contract was fulfilled and stop his son from making the same bad choices Thane had made as a young Drell.

When Shepard boarded the Normandy and went to the CIC, she got on comms and told Joker to lay in a course and depart for the Citadel as soon as he got confirmation that all souls were on deck. Yeoman Chambers also informed her that both Operative Lawson and Jack needed to speak to her at her convenience. Miranda had rescanned her office for listening devices as soon as she had come back on board, so as soon as the commander walked into her office, she got straight to the point. "I just wanted to thank you, Shepard. For putting in a good word for me with Dr T'Soni."

Shepard shrugged her shoulders. "Don't thank me. All I said was that she could do worse."

The look of surprise on Miranda's face was priceless and Shepard broke out laughing. "Gods, Miranda. You're almost as easy as Liara!" Suddenly the commander's face turned bright red. "Oh. That just came out all wrong!" They were both laughing at Shepard's bad choice of wording when Shepard finally pulled herself back together. "You know what I meant, damn it." She shook her head. "I did tell her I trust you and that you're no longer TIM's lackey, but Liara makes her own decisions."

"Well, I'm still going to thank you, Commander, because it's your trust that's giving me the opportunity to prove myself in her eyes. I have a long way to go yet to earn redemption and her personal trust." Miranda's face pinched in regret. "I'm hoping that someday we may even be able to consider one another friends. I've come to realize she'd be a nice one to have."

Shepard's eyes kind of glazed over and she had a faraway smile for just a moment before she answered. "She is at that. Sometimes loyal to a fault, but that's not always a bad thing, is it?" Shepard shook her head to clear the Liara-induced haze and refocused on the tasks at hand. "I'd like to sit down in the near future and get a full readiness report from you. We're coming down to the wire."

All joking fell to the wayside when Miranda looked back at her. "Understood, Commander. It's a couple of days to the Citadel. Why don't we sit down first thing in the morning? That will give me the rest of today to put it all together. We've got a lot of moving pieces I need to corral."
"Actually, I'm finally going to start the cybernetics upgrades with Karin and have the first two skin weaves completed. You have command while we transit to the Citadel, so work with Karin as far as when she'll let us talk."

Miranda nodded. "Yes, Ma'am. May I ask what changed your mind about getting the procedures done?"

Shepard shrugged. "Liara. She told me I need to do everything I can to get back home safe to her." Shepard smiled at the memory. "She claimed my heart and my soul. Everything else is mine to change if it improves my chances to stay alive."

The commander's visit to Jack cleared yet another hurdle. While nothing in the Normandy's files had provided anything definitive, Jack had asked Tali to data-mine her Shadow Broker dossier to see what information the Broker had on her. When Tali turned it over to her, Jack was livid. She discovered her mother had been lied to by a Dr Castor at the Helios Medical Facility on Eden Prime in 2165, because of her eezo exposure and biotic potential. He told her mother that she died from a seizure during a damn checkup! Cerberus stole her as a baby and shipped her off to a place called the Teltin Facility on Pragia. Additional research on the facility showed it was now closed down, but Jack wanted to visit to be sure, and blow the place to hell. Shepard agreed, then went to Tali and got a copy of everything she had provided to Jack. It was the opening topic for her eventual meeting with Miranda.

Miranda read the report Shepard tossed her. "This isn't at all familiar. I was focused on nanotechnologies and synthetic enhancements like the heavy weaves you're getting now. I didn't have anything to do with any of the biotics divisions."

"I'm not saying it's your fault, Miranda, but Cerberus is certainly responsible for it. I want you prepared when Jack brings this to you." Shepard shook her head. "I'm almost one hundred percent sure you're gonna hear about it. I'd recommend you don't dispute it; just disavow any personal knowledge. You weren't working for Cerberus yet when she was taken, and you weren't a high-level operative until after she was released. Hopefully, she accepts the truth."

"Oh, I'll disavow all personal knowledge, Shepard. Then I'll take it an extra step and offer to help her blow the place to hell. This is appalling! They experimented on and killed children for God's sake!" The look on Miranda's face was one of pure disgust.

Shepard looked unsure. "It's Jack's mission, we'll see if she's willing to let you help when we're done with our missions at the Citadel. In the meantime, you could have told me that the weaves were gonna hurt like a bitch. At least the pain doesn't linger." Shepard grinned at Miranda to ease the guilty expression the operative had on her face. "Just giving you crap, Miranda. Don't worry...I can deal with short term pain now if it keeps me alive later. Now. How about that readiness report?"

Miranda filled her in on everything, and Shepard was pleasantly surprised; they were actually looking very good. After the trips to the Citadel and Pragia, all the personal issues that had been raised would be taken care of, and they would be ready to go pick up the IFF, whether or not the Broker's team had found any data on it or the derelict Reaper it was housed in. So far they had turned up nothing, much to Liara's disappointment.

When they were done with their review, Shepard had a huge smile on her face. "You know, before we left Hagalaz, Liara had an interesting bit of info for me... You and Judea?"

Miranda blushed and smiled. "Maybe. We're talking. Speaking of which, she told me to ask you
about communicating with her without the Illusive Man figuring out I'm dating a T'Soni commando. She said you converse with Liara somehow, and could probably help us out?"

"Ah. Yeah. It's microburst technology, but not mine to give away. I can pass notes for you though. Just give me the messages on a datapad. Text only, two hundred characters or less. You'll have to deal with me as an intermediary though." Shepard saw the disappointment on her XO's face. "Sorry, Miranda, but it's the best I can do for now. Don't worry...with the way the mission's going, it won't be much longer before we hit the relay. After that... well, you'll be on the Aletheia with her and won't need to send secure messages across the comm buoys."

The arrival on the Citadel was much more routine than their previous visits; no talking advertisements and no questions about being dead, so the trio was able to proceed directly to Captain Bailey's office in C-Sec. When they walked in, Captain Bailey immediately stood. "Commander Shepard. What can I do for you this fine day?"

Shepard chuckled. "Fine day? They got you drinking the Kool-Aid, Bailey?"

Bailey smirked. "No, Ma'am. But I can advertise you're on station and my crime rate will drop by twenty percent for the next few days. And we'll all get a bit of a break."

"Ah, yeah. Well, about that." Shepard shook her head. "I'm not even supposed to be operating in Council space, and I'm afraid I might actually stir the pot a bit. Though I'll try not to make too much of a mess." At Bailey's raised eyebrows, she continued. "Two things. I need to find a Drell and a forger named Fade."

Bailey wore a frown as he answered. "Fade. I know him by reputation. I'd be happy if you can put him out of business. He works for the Blue Suns and has been a pain in my ass. He's infiltrated our network somehow, so whenever we get close he disappears without a trace. I can put you on his trail, and you being outside C-Sec just might give you the edge to catch him."

Garrus stepped in, "Great. Where do we start?"

Bailey nodded. "Marketplace warehouse. Some of Fade's contacts work out of there. Just try to not make too much of a mess, if you get my drift."

Shepard nodded in return. "Understood, Bailey. I'll try to be discreet, but the Blue Suns have no reason to like either Garrus or me, so I imagine things might get noisy. You might want to be thinking about some anti-gang operation cover story so you're ready for the likely shit-storm headed your way. Sorry."

Bailey grimaced. "Afraid you were going to say that. Ah well. If you're gonna make a ruckus, at least make a big enough dent in the mercs to make it worth my while."

The way Shepard laughed did not make Bailey feel any better. "The other thing. The Drell. We think a local criminal may have hired him and, this time, we're actually trying to keep him from doing something stupid."

Bailey shrugged. "That should be easy. We don't see many Drell here. What kind of stupidity we talking about preventing?"

Shepard glanced at Thane. It was his son, after all, so she figured he could take the lead. Thane quickly stepped forward. "He is my son. I am simply trying to keep him from a life of crime."
"Ah. Well. Most parents just let their kids run wild and use C-Sec as station-wide babysitters. More than happy to help one out who actually takes an interest in their kid's upbringing." Bailey kept on keying through the report search until his eyes finally lit up. "Here we go. One of my men recently reported a Drell talking to Mouse. Interesting."

Shepard's brow pinched between her eyes. "Mouse?"

Bailey looked up. "Yeah. Petty criminal. Former duct rat until he got too big. Now he's just a messenger; runs errands for anyone who'll pay. Good, bad or otherwise. He's usually upstairs, outside the Dark Star. He works out of a public comm terminal there."

"Thanks, Bailey. We'll try to be out of your hair quick and quiet." Shepard glanced at her teammates and headed into the Citadel.

Thane was surprised that Shepard had let him take the lead. "You didn't tell him who I was or that Kolyat plans to assassinate someone."

Shepard shrugged. "Assassination is not necessarily something I care to discuss with the police. I like Bailey. He's already done me a favor or two. No need to compromise his position any more than we have to."

"I was not there for Kolyat when he was young, and I would not wish to be separated from him now that I intend to make amends. Accomplishing that and our mission against the Collectors would be difficult for me from a jail cell." Thane spoke quietly. "Thank you, Shepard. I am not used to working with people who take everyone's interests into consideration."

Garrus chuckled. "In your line of work, I wouldn't think you were used to working with anyone."

Thane almost smiled. "Valid point, Garrus. Though I was simply thinking if more people took others' interests into consideration, there would be fewer people at both ends of my services."

Garrus twitched his mandibles in surprise. "Hmmm. Also a valid point. Hadn't thought of it quite that way." His eyes moved to the commander. "Soooo. Where first, Shepard?"

Figuring the assassination was probably a bit more time sensitive, the team chased down Mouse first. After an enlightening conversation with the overgrown duct rat, they identified the source of the contract as a human named Elias Kelham, who was making a name for himself running the rackets in the lower wards. After a not-so-polite conversation with that man, Kelham admitted the target was a Turian named Joram Talid. He was running for office on a platform to end organized crime; it certainly explained Kelham's dislike for the man, but there was more... Talid was also anti-human. Shepard grimaced when she'd heard that. If it wasn't for Garrus and the Spectre Nihlus Kryik, she'd have to wonder about the Turian race as a whole; Saren, Councilor Sparatus, and now Talid. She shook her head in disgust; she'd never understood racism. To her, it all seemed like a baseless fear of the unknown. All anyone had to do was look at her crew to see how much she valued diversity.

They located the politician on the campaign trail and followed him through the wards, keeping an eye out for any hint of Kolyat. Shepard found it rather hypocritical that Talid was running on an anti-crime platform, because he was using his bodyguard to shake down various businesses as he moved between stops and spoke to voters. She recorded a number of the transactions and sent the recording to Bailey. At the end of the day, Talid returned to his apartment and that was where they found Kolyat, lying in wait outside his residence. Shepard briefly toyed with the idea of letting Kolyat finish off the crooked politician, but that wouldn't help Thane focus on the mission. She had to help
him finish what they started.

An untrained assassin on his first job was no match for Thane and Shepard, and they quickly had Kolyat disarmed and turned over to C-Sec. C-Sec had arrived much too quickly; it was obvious Bailey had followed them. Bailey gave them a ride back to the precinct, where Shepard left Thane to talk to his son. They would meet him back on the Normandy. She glanced at Garrus. "Come on, Vakarian. We've got us a forger to find."

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Shepard assumed Zaeed would be happy to help against the Blue Suns, regardless of whether or not Vido had already gone down, so she placed a quick call to the ship. Soon enough, the aging merc was standing before them, ready to go. When they walked into the Marketplace warehouse, the first thing they saw was a couple of Krogan bodyguards. As they moved farther into the room, a Volus walked around the corner. Shepard snorted; Bailey had said Fade's contacts worked out of the location, not Fade himself, so she got straight to the point and they quickly discovered Fade worked out of an old prefab foundry in the factory district. The Volus warned them, "He's got a lot of mercs there... Blue Suns. Harkin thinks they're protecting him."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Why is it that people refuse to heed my warnings? First Rana Thanoptis, now Harkin. I give 'em a second chance and they spit in my face."

Garrus grumped, "Bastard! He's using his knowledge of C-Sec to help those scum. But I know the exact building, so we just need to grab a skycar."

Shepard growled, "I'm looking forward to seeing Harkin again..."

Garrus had a similar attitude. "I'm sure he'll be excited to see both of us."

When they arrived, a couple of Blue Suns were guarding the door and Harkin just happened to walk around the corner. He immediately recognized he was in deep trouble. "Shepard? Shit! He yelled at the guards as he retreated back through the doorway, "Don't just stand there! Stop them... Stop them!"

As the gunfight started, Garrus shouted at the vanishing Fade, "Run all you want, Harkin. We'll find you!"

The first two guards at the doorway hardly even slowed them down, but the very first room had a number of mechs to take down and Shepard quickly realized she'd made a tactical error. Yes, Zaeed wanted to eradicate the Blue Suns, but having only him and Garrus along meant she didn't have a tag-team biotic with her; she had four on board and didn't tap any of them. That made her 'crash and blast' approach a bit more dangerous. Still, they progressed quickly through the warehouse, pushing as quickly as they could. Shepard did not want Harkin to escape or Garrus would never forgive her. On one of the larger warehouse floors, they ran into a heavy mech that slowed them significantly and Shepard again cussed herself for not having an extra biotic with them. When the mech finally went down and they were ready to move into the next section, Garrus growled. "Harkin's always been a pain in the ass, but I'm in no mood for any more of his games. If he doesn't cooperate, I'll beat him within an inch of his life."

Shepard nodded, "No sense giving him more time to get ready for us. Let's move."

They moved into the next room and saw explosive crates moving overhead. She pointed them out and while both of her teammates grinned, Zaeed also practically purred in satisfaction, "Alright!"
There were plenty of mechs coming at them, but things got interesting when two heavy mechs dropped in simultaneously. Shepard keyed into her comms, "Garrus. Hang back and get a sniper shot on those explosives. I need you to drop as many as you can on those heavies!"

She and Zaeed tag-teamed on the heavy mechs to keep them occupied and moving slow. Garrus managed to drop two crates before the first mech exploded, then the team combined on the second to drop it relatively quickly. As soon as the second heavy mech went down, they climbed a series of crates and raised platforms on the far side of the room to finally make it to the door of the main dispatch room. Shepard peeked around the corner and Harkin was in there, his fingers flying over the control panel like he was conducting a symphony. Garrus circled to the door on the opposite side and signaled Shepard once he was in position. Shepard stood and she and Zaeed moved into Harkin's line of sight.

He sneered contemptuously at the Spectre as he backed to the other doorway to make good his escape. "You were close, but not close enough."

As he turned to bolt through the door, Garrus stepped in and smashed Harkin's nose with the butt of his assault rifle then grabbed him and slammed the forger against the wall. "So, Fade... Couldn't make yourself disappear, huh?"

Harkin's voice oozed disdain, "Come on, Garrus. We can work this out. Whaddaya need?"

Garrus released Harkin, turned his back on him and took one step away. "I'm looking for someone."

Harkin got bold... and stupid, considering he already had a broken nose, thinking he had room to barter. "Well, I guess we both have something the other one wants."

The step Garrus had taken put him a perfect one-arm's-length away and he spun quickly, backhanding Harkin and slamming him against the wall again before stepping up and kneeing him in the crotch. Shepard winced. "Ouch. That had to hurt. Maybe you should just tell Garrus what he wants to know."

Harkin dragged himself off the floor, trying to hold his nose and what was left of his balls at the same time. He grunted out, "Maybe. I still haven't heard exactly what you want."

Garrus growled impatiently, "You helped Lantar Sidonis disappear. I need to find him."

Harkin got defensive. "I know who he is, but I'm not telling you squat. I can't give out client information, it's bad for business."

Garrus lashed out again, smashing Harkin's head back against the wall before sending him to the floor. He stepped forward and placed an armored boot on the forger's neck. "You know what else is bad for business? A broken neck!"

Harkin wheezed out, "Alright! Alright! Get off me!" When Garrus released the pressure, Harkin sat up and stared at the big Turian. "The Terminus really changed you, didn't it, Garrus?"

Garrus glared at the pitiful Human groveling at his feet. "No, but Sidonis... opened my eyes. Now. Arrange a meeting."

Harkin clawed his way up the wall and moved to a comm terminal to call Sidonis; he told him his identity may have been compromised and set up a meeting for him to receive his new identification. He turned back to Garrus, quickly, wanting this bad business to be over with. "It's all good. He wants to meet you in front of the Orbital Lounge. Middle of the day." Harkin glanced around nervously. "Sooo... if our business is done, I'll be going."
Garrus reached out and grabbed the front of Harkin's shirt before he could turn away. "I don't think so. You're a criminal now, Harkin."

Harkin was still combative, "So what? You just gonna kill me? Not your style, Garrus."

Garrus stared at Harkin hard for a moment and Shepard suddenly feared that he might do just that. As she was getting ready to reach out, Garrus shoved Harkin away. "Kill you? No. But I don't mind slowing you down to be sure C-Sec can catch you." Garrus promptly capped Harkin's left knee.

Harkin screamed in pain and collapsed, writhing in pain on the floor as Garrus dropped a message to Bailey over his omnitool. Garrus then turned and shot the secure comm terminal Harkin had used, to make sure 'Fade' couldn't contact Sidonis and call off the meet.

Harkin grunted out, "You.... Bastard!"

Shepard growled. "Consider yourself lucky. We let you go, once. This time? I wouldn't have shot you in the leg. Sidonis better be there, or I'll use my Spectre status to finish the job, no matter where you are."

When they arrived at the designated meeting point, Garrus quickly scoped the area and picked a sniper's nest to operate from. "I can get a clear shot from over there and no one will ever see it coming, or see me leave."

Shepard nodded. "Ok. What do you need me to do?"

"Just keep him talking and don't get in my way. I'll let you know when he's in my sights." Garrus hesitated at the sound of laughter from the back seat.

Zaeed grunted. "Shepard. You think he's gonna trust an N7 Spectre to be handing out forged IDs like candy? The minute he sees you, he's gone. Give me the damn passes. I'll do it."

Garrus hummed. "He's got a point, Shepard." He looked at Zaeed. "You screw this up, second shot goes in your head."

Zaeed's eyes narrowed and his voice was low and hard. "Blue Suns leader tried that once already. You see where that got him. I'm offering to help you, dickwad. Don't insult me."

Garrus nodded. "Alright. I accept. We both know where the other is coming from."

Shepard shrugged, "So, what? I'm just a spectator now?"

Garrus chuckled. "No, you're a Spectre. You bail us out with C-Sec if the plan goes to hell."

Sidonis died quickly, so they were soon in the car and back at the entrance near C-Sec. Garrus and Zaeed went back to the Normandy, and Shepard went to C-Sec to talk to Bailey. She gave him the rundown on everything that happened with 'Fade' and Harkin before asking about Talid. Bailey looked up at her. "I owe you another one there, Shepard. You probably saved me having to deal with a bunch of race riots in the future. Your recordings were enough to have him charged with corruption, so I passed the information to Spectre Jondum Bau and he's already made the arrest."

Bailey shook his head. "Your Drell spent a lot of time with his son, but the kid's been through a lot. Gonna take a lot more time and talking, but that'll be tough with him in prison for attempted murder."

Shepard scoffed, "Come on, Bailey... He didn't kill anybody, he has no priors, and the guy he was
after is a scumbag. The kid wants to make a difference. Give him community service."

Bailey actually laughed. "Community service? For attempted murder? No judge will agree to that."

Shepard grinned. "Didn't you just say you owed me one? Keep it out of the courts, Bailey. Give him 'a private' C-Sec probation. Put him to work for you, personally. Keep the file as insurance. If he busts your contract, then charge him and put him away."

Bailey stood up and faced her. "Interesting. I'll think about it. I might need some top cover to pull that off though."

She stuck her hand out. "Consider it done. You've got my Spectre authorization if you need it. Thanks, Bailey."

Bailey shook his head in surrender as he took her hand. "No. Thank you, Shepard. You stopped an assassination, saved a kid's future, shut down a major forgery operation... and that warehouse is a goldmine of information on the Blue Suns and all the spies they've set up in any number of companies on the Citadel. And, you didn't make nearly as big a mess as I thought you would. Now, before you go, though, I need you to take a ride with me."

Shepard looked at him. "To?"

Bailey shook his head, "Really can't say. Not here. Trust me?"

Shepard laughed. "Shit, Bailey. If I can't trust you by now, we both need to find better business connections. Lead the way."

They climbed in a squad car and all the windows tinted so no one could see in the car. Shepard was curious, but Bailey wasn't talking. As they got closer to their destination, Shepard realized where they were headed; the secure embassy housing district. "Hmmph. If Anderson wanted to see me, all he had to do is ask. Why the cloak and dagger, Bailey?"

The C-Sec captain shrugged. "I don't know the politics behind this, Shepard. I'm just a glorified taxi driver today." He set the car on the landing zone and opened the door. "I'm here until you're done, then I'll take you back to C-Sec."

Shepard got out of the car and went to the only door available to her. When it slid open, she froze in her tracks. She had assumed it was Anderson's apartment, but she was mistaken. She was met at the door by none other than Huntress Nizia Tenir. Tenir bowed in respect. "Welcome, Commander. I attended your memorial service and met your mother. I cannot say how much it pleases me to see you again. The councilor is awaiting you. Please. If you'll follow me?"

Tenir walked through the shuttle reception area and turned right, into a large sitting room. Tevos stood quickly from her seat and strode purposely across the room, grasped a surprised Shepard by her shoulders and quickly leaned in, kissing her once on each cheek. She had tears in her eyes as she all but purred in welcome, obviously pleased. "Shepard. It is so good to see you in the flesh. Your absence has been deeply felt."

Shepard smiled. "I actually intended to come visit you a while back, but got shanghaied by Sha'ira, on the request of my bondmate." A look of surprise on the councilor's face made her stop, wondering about Tevos' reaction. "Councilor?"

Tevos dipped her head graciously, "Apologies, Commander. That was rude of me, but did you say...'bondmate?'"
Shepard's eyes lit up in realization. "Oh, gosh. I'm speaking to an Asari. My turn to apologize. Most folks I deal with don't recognize the distinction and I use the term loosely to avoid having to explain. Liara and I are still promised. We haven't actually bonded yet." Shepard smirked. "Don't worry. You'll be invited."

Tevos visibly relaxed at that clarification and spoke again. "Please, Shepard. Sit with me for a while. Would you like some wine? Elasa?"

"How about some tea? I don't think returning to the Normandy with alcohol on my breath would be the wisest decision." Shepard winced. "Sorry, Tevos, but I don't want to sit on your furniture. I didn't know Bailey was bringing me here, and I haven't been to the doc after my last mission. I uhm... I don't want to get any blood on your couch."

Tevos turned quickly, surprise reflected in her face. "By the Goddess. I should have considered that. I apologize, Commander!" She quickly closed the distance between them. "We'll treat your wounds while we talk. Help me with your armor."

Shepard's face went beet red as she stuttered. "I... ah. I don't really think that's necessary, Councilor."

Tevos nodded at one of her servants and looked back at Shepard. "Nonsense. Don't be so modest. You are the one who declared us friends. I will not stand by while a friend is injured and not treat you." The servant quickly returned with materials to wash and treat the wounds, but Tevos took everything and quickly set about treating Shepard herself. Shepard's skin was hot with embarrassment, but Tevos' attentions were extremely efficient and gentle. She was surprised at the lack of penetration of the weapons rounds, and she frowned in puzzlement. "Shepard, this is not normal for Humans, is it? Your skin is..." Her voice faded out and she met Shepard's eyes in curiosity.

Shepard finished the sentence for her. "...enhanced with a synthetic weave to make it more resilient... more resistant to puncture wounds and penetrations. I just had it done, so it's all new to me and still a bit sensitive."

"It is intriguing. And apparently effective. It makes removing the rounds very easy, and your skin responds amazingly quickly to the medigel!" Tevos studied her skin with wonder.

Even in her awkward situation, Shepard couldn't help but chuckle. "You know, Liara once threatened me with an in-depth study, but she never actually did it."

With the gentle reminder of propriety, Tevos suddenly snatched her hands back and her eyes snapped up to meet the commander's. "Goddess. I apologize, Shepard. It is not my place." Tevos finished up her administrations and handed Shepard back her compression shirt, which the commander gratefully slipped back over her head and pulled down to cover her torso.

"Thanks, Tevos. That actually does make me much more comfortable...and not only because I'm clothed again." Shepard smirked at the councilor's discomfiture. "I get the feeling you don't normally undress your Spectres when they come to visit."

Tevos actually blushed. "No. Well, to be honest, in all my years as a councilor, a Spectre has never been welcomed to my flat. I have always met them elsewhere." At the look of disbelief on Shepard's face, the councilor smiled. "At least, until now. And you are here as my friend, not as a Spectre."

Tevos was troubled and very unceremoniously flopped down onto her couch with a big sigh. "Shepard. You are different than anyone I have ever met before and I agonize over the possibility that we could lose you before this is all over." She gazed directly at the commander as she continued.
"I worry about you. I hear things, Shepard. Things that are of great concern to me, both as a councilor and to me personally. Might I ask you about them?"

Still having no idea why the councilor summoned her, Shepard nodded in acceptance, hoping to finally get to the heart of the matter. Tevos closed her eyes briefly as if to steel herself, then exhaled and forced the words across her lips. "I understand you are planning to transit the Omega-4 Relay to the Collector homeworld."

Shepard laughed and, since she had shed her bloody armor, finally took a seat on one of the couches. She was much more relaxed as she spoke than the councilor who issued the statement. "It must be an Asari thing. You and Liara both say you want to ask a question, but then utter a statement. That was not a question, Tevos, but yes...we are going through the relay to the Galactic Core."

Tevos drew in a sharp breath and, out of the corner of her eye, Shepard saw Huntress Tenir twitch in shock at the frank confirmation. "Shepard! How do you propose to complete such a task? It's never been done! We cannot let you cast your life away on a task doomed to failure!"

Shepard smiled softly. "It's done by the Collectors all the time. And I'm going to do it with a lot of dedicated people helping me, Councilor. I have once again built a top-notch team, and we have found and developed some new technologies that, should it all work, I will share with all the council races as soon as we return. New shielding, new weapons, even a new IFF system that should allow us to transit the relays with much greater precision."

"Where is all this coming from, Shepard?" Tevos shook her head in bewilderment, fearing it was Reaper technology.

"Everywhere, Tevos. We Humans have a saying; necessity is the mother of invention. The weapon is an enhanced version of something the Turians have been working on for a while, shielding is from the Quarians, cross-species cooperative engineering has been key to adapting the technology to our systems, and Liara's information brokerage was working overtime to help me find some missing pieces and complete all kinds of upgrades. I think perhaps that is why she was targeted. We're making too much progress and we have the Collectors frightened." Shepard sipped her tea like she was relaxing and watching a skyball game on a Sunday afternoon. "May I ask a question in exchange?"

"Certainly, Commander." Tevos sipped her Elasa and waited patiently, her concerns soothed by Shepard's explanation as to the sources of the new technologies.

Shepard was direct. "Why did the idea of Liara being bonded to me make you anxious?" Tevos' coloring was already a fairly dark blue so it was hard to tell, but Shepard swore the councilor blushed slightly at the question. "Does the Matriarchy not approve?"

"Oh no! That is no concern, Shepard. Believe me. That you would choose to bond with an Asari is looked upon very favorably on Thessia. It's more of a personal issue to me." Tevos paused to collect her thoughts before she continued. "Liara is very young, and bonding so early can pose certain ... hazards, especially given her particular situation... being separated from other Asari during a critical change of life. And I promised her mother that I would look after her in her absence... before she left to join Saren."

Shepard frowned at the memory that statement evoked. "If it is any comfort, we are both very aware of the age issue and are taking active steps to minimize those risks, Tevos. I have actually spoken to Sha'ira about being a mentor to Liara to help her make the necessary transitions that her mother should have been here to do, had circumstances not been as they are." Shepard looked directly at Tevos. "I will do nothing to risk Liara, Tevos. You can bet your life on that. And I had an interesting
'talk' with Matron Lyessa at the country estate prior to my formal proposal."

"As you say, Commander, and I have no reason to doubt your word." Tevos smiled gently as she looked into her dwindling glass of wine. "And the formal proposal was in high Thessian, if the stories are to be believed. I would have liked to have witnessed that. But I still worry about her. As I worry about you."

"I'm a soldier, Tevos. An N-7. A Spectre." Shepard shook her head in amazement. "And Liara is tougher than you realize. She's learned a lot, and suffered through more than most can imagine, these past three years." A heavy sigh escaped the Spectre. "And most of it is due to me." A twinge of painful regret flashed across her face as she grew silent.

Tevos stood and moved to the couch next to the commander. She reached over and gently clasped the commander's hand in comfort. "Never feel guilt for the love you feel, Shepard. It is a gift, and never something that should be regretted."

"I don't feel guilty for the love, Councilor. I feel guilty about the pain I have caused her, and the pain which I know a future with me will continue to bring." Shepard saw Tevos about to interrupt and she shook her head. "No, Tevos. We both know it. Until this Reaper war is over we don't know what our future holds. I am a soldier and I will fight. And I will get hurt. For many of those days Liara will be at my side, but not yet. We will wait at least until I return from the Omega-4 Relay. I need her here to continue the fight in the event the unthinkable happens and I don't return."

Tevos said nothing for a moment as she stood and stepped away. She swallowed hard and turned back to the commander. "Shepard. The day we melded and you showed me your mind, something happened. Once you released the phantoms of Elysium, you held nothing back from me. You were very open and you showed me much. I feel like I have known you your whole life. I lived your triumphs, I suffered your failures. I felt your joys and suffered your pain. There is a reason certain council guidelines are in place, but they are just guidelines and I felt the special circumstances required special actions. But, because of that, now I have to live with the consequences of having such intimate knowledge of you. I feel unusually close to you, Shepard, and I find it hard to risk you for the mission. For different reasons, you and Liara are both like children to me..." Tevos stopped and shook her head, feeling suddenly as if she had revealed too much. "I need to let you get back to your mission." Tevos closed her eyes and whispered, "Go with the Goddess, Shepard, and come back to us safe."

Shepard stood and closed the distance to Tevos, laying a hand gently on her arm. Tevos opened her eyes again as Shepard spoke. "You honor me, Tevos, with your kind words. Liara and I are not your children, but we are your friends and friends watch out for one another."

Shepard turned to leave, then suddenly stopped and turned back. "Tevos? From your tone, I can only assume you feel as if you shouldn't have melded with me the first time, and I'm sorry you feel that way. I harbor no regrets about the meld and I'm happy that you now understand me so well. But now that the bridge has been crossed, would you meld with me again?" Tevos glanced away while she thought about the answer to that question, unable to meet the commander's eyes for a moment. Her grey eyes eventually returned to the waiting green ones. "Goddess help me, but if you asked it of me, I would not deny you."

Shepard nodded. "I won't ask... not now, anyway. But I will offer. You read my mission report from Aratoth. Object Rho put images into my mind just as the beacons did. You saw the remnants of the burn mark running halfway down my back where it overloaded my nervous system and forced me unconscious. I saw the coming of the Reapers... and they are powerful, Tevos. I don't find it so hard to imagine a fleet of Sovereign-class ships coming out of the relays to harvest us because I have
already seen it in my mind's eye. I wouldn't wish that vision upon anyone, but I do ask one thing of you. Trust in me. Believe me when I tell you the Reapers are coming. Do not play politics as usual and, even if the council at large will not believe and cannot be convinced, tell the Matriarchy. Get the Asari ready for war, Tevos, or we may all perish. May your judgments in the future be wise, Councilor. Go with the Goddess."

"Aethyta. It's good to see you." Tevos sat quietly at her terminal, awaiting some form of response from the Matriarch. Instead, she received only a steady glare. "I'm sorry it's taken so long, but I just finally saw Shepard in person."

"And?" Aethyta was giving no ground until her previously voiced concerns were answered to her satisfaction.

Tevos shook her head. "I have no proof, but Shepard was amazingly relaxed during her visit with me. She swears Liara is safe and not on the Normandy. It also appears Shepard is the self-appointed enforcer within the Spectres. First Saren Arterius and now Tela Vasir. Vasir did indeed orchestrate the attack against Liara and, even though Liara was relatively unharmed, Shepard made Vasir pay for it with her life. I swear to you, the attack was by no order of the Council that I am aware of. There is someone else at work here."

Aethyta growled from deep in her throat. "If not the Council, then who? Did the Matriarchs make a move anyway, even with me here?" Aethyta stood and paced. "The T'Soni commandos have closed the brokerage office and vanished. I assume to go guard Liara at her new location, wherever the hell that is. And Mozia tells me they've made arrangements to pick up both of the personal transports that were stashed in storage at the estate." Tevos watched as Aethyta paced and spoke to herself. Aethyta nodded. "Shepard's smart, and if she's relaxed, then my girl's safe, I'm sure of it." She stopped and stared at the Councilor again. "And I think she's going mobile with a commando escort. I'm headed home. To Thessia. If I hear even a sniff that the Matriarchs arranged this, be prepared for some changes in leadership."

Tevos' eyes got wide. "Thyta! Please. Don't even jest. Shepard revealed something to me that Sha'ira has already spoken of... We cannot afford to upset our power bases right now. Come to the Citadel and I'll explain."

Aethyta's eyes narrowed. "Last time Shi was here, she mentioned a storm coming. I gather you have a bit more detail than what she was willing to share on Illium?"

Tevos nodded. "Yes. And if we repeat our mistakes of the past, the Asari may not have a future to worry about."

Aethyta was perfectly still for a few moments, absorbing the expression on Tevos' face, and she realized the Councilor was serious. Dead serious. "I'm out of here on the next open shuttle. I'll see you in a couple of days."
Everyone was curious as to what had taken the commander so long after Garrus and Zaeed had left her behind on the Citadel, so she gave them an abridged tale of having to explain the disappearance from Illium of a certain Asari citizen to a certain concerned Asari councilor, who then insisted on treating her injuries since Shepard reported to her straight from a mission and threatened to bleed on her couch. All the casual banter was put aside when Yeoman Chambers informed the commander of a high priority message on her terminal from the Illusive Man.

From: Illusive Man

Shepard,

One of our cells just went off the grid without explanation. Project Overlord has been experimenting with highly volatile technology and I need you to investigate. Their work is extremely compartmentalized, enough that I can't divulge operational details over this channel. You'll find them on the planet Aite, Typhon system, in the Phoenix Massing cluster. Please use care in this matter.

Shepard immediately flagged Miranda over as she spoke into the comm, directing Joker to plot a course to Aite. "Miranda. What do you know about Project Overlord?"

Miranda shook her head. "Not a lot, Shepard. Like the Illusive Man said, each independent project has its own restricted data, and I was head of Lazarus, so I don't know much. Though we'll probably want Tali. I think it had something to do with Geth technology. I'm sorry, Commander, not much help, I'm afraid. I'm sure the Illusive Man has pulled what access I may have had on it, but I'll look anyway and see what I can find."

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Shepard returned to her room and had just finished changing out of her armor when Joker came over the comm link, "Commander, Jack and Miranda are in the middle of a.... disagreement. Can you head it off before they tear out a bulkhead?"

Shepard grimaced. Damn it! "I'll deal with it, Joker."

Joker's voice was strained, but he still had his warped sense of humor. "Take pictures!"

Shepard broke into a jog as she emerged from the elevator and as she approached Miranda's door, she could hear Jack's voice loud and clear. "Touch me and I will smear the walls with you, bitch!"

As the door slid open at her approach, the commander saw Jack, lit up bright with biotics, as she launched a large chair across the room aimed at Miranda. In her firmest command voice, Shepard belted out, "Enough! Stand down, both of you!"
Jack, of course, didn't have an ounce of military discipline in her entire body and she stepped towards Miranda, complaining. "The cheerleader won't admit what Cerberus did was wrong!"

Miranda shook her head in disgust. "That is not what I said, and you just love to take every word I say and twist it!"

Jack shoved her finger into Miranda's face. "Screw you! It's always Cerberus first with you. We were supposed to be heading to Pragia, yet here we go again, off on some special mission for Timmy. Maybe it's time I showed you just what they put me through!"

Shepard quickly stepped between them and shoved them apart. "Our mission is too important for this bullshit. We can't let personal issues get in the way." Shepard glared at Jack. "When I showed Miranda the report on Pragia, she was disgusted that they experimented on children. She wanted to ask to go along on the mission and help you!" As Jack stepped back with a shocked look on her face, Shepard turned to Miranda. "And what exactly did you say that Jack was able to twist?"

"All I said was that until we get down there, we don't know for sure. It may not have been Cerberus policy. It could have been a rogue cell."

Shepard threw her head back and stared at the ceiling. "Oh for Gods' sake, Miranda. You've got to learn that rogue or Cerberus proper doesn't matter." Her head came back down and she stared at the operative. "Say we're coming into the Citadel and Garrus gets pissed off and fires the cannon. We take out the dock and every worker and passenger in it at the time. Rogue action or not, as the captain of the Normandy, I'm still responsible. Circumstances don't matter. It's my fault. So no matter if the cell was rogue or not, it's still Cerberus' fault, because they are ultimately responsible for the action of every person under their command. Period. A real commander never uses the words plausible deniability. Such a thing doesn't exist."

Now it was Miranda's chance to stare while Jack laughed and commented. "Geez, Shepard. With the band of misfits you've collected for this mission, if you're the commander who's responsible for all our actions... you're fucked!"

Shepard didn't find her statement very amusing as she stepped back and glared back and forth between the two of them. "And you, Jack. Pragia's dead. Waiting a couple more days won't matter... As for the 'special mission for Timmy,' as you put it, it's called Project Overlord and we need to go. Cerberus is screwing around with Geth and the cell just went quiet. I don't even want to start to imagine what could be happening there right now. All I know is we need to put a stop to it."

Miranda got quiet and Jack sneered. "A chance to fuck up a Cerberus project? You just might have a point there, Shepard." She glared at Miranda. "Count me in!"

Shepard shook her head slowly. "You both know what we're up against. Save your anger for the Collectors and your judgment of each other and our nefarious connections to Cerberus at least until we're done with all this shit and have the whole picture."

Miranda was the first to acquiesce. "I can put aside my differences. I just want Jack to make an informed decision, instead of guessing based on the memory of a half-crazed, drugged up child."

Jack sneered, "Cerberus made that crazed child, but sure, I'll do my part. I'd hate to see the Cheerleader die before we get the chance to settle this ourselves." Her eyes shifted from Miranda to Shepard. "And I promise to hold off on killing her until after the mission's complete."

Jack turned and started to head for the door when Shepard reached a hand out in front of her as she queried, "You going to be okay?"
Jack glared at Shepard and as their eyes met, she realized Shepard's look of concern was sincere and the sneer fell away from her face, but she still pushed past the hand and departed without another word.

Shepard's glance returned to Miranda, who replied, "It's a good thing you came by when you did. As long as she does her job, we'll be fine. Thanks, Shepard."

"Miranda. I'm serious about the whole responsibility thing. Cerberus can't play with fire and then bitch when they get burned. Whatever happens in all those cells, they're still accountable."

Miranda looked down at the floor. "Understood, Shepard." She shook her head. "To be honest, it was more a reflex answer than how I honestly feel at this point, but Jack's not ready to hear that."

Shepard huffed in agreement. "Yeah. You're right, there. I'll talk to her about taking you on the mission."

"Thank you, Commander." Miranda's face carried a self-deprecating smile. "I'm just not very good at accommodating rude or impetuous people."

Shepard laughed on her way out the door. "And Jack's both."

When she arrived at the engineering sub-deck, Jack was still feeling pretty hostile. "I can't believe you can work with her, Shepard. She's such a bitch!" Jack was amazingly relaxed, laid back on her cot and staring at the ceiling.

Shepard laughed. "Yeah, but she's our bitch, and I'm glad she's not in TIM's pocket anymore. She's feeling a little lost, believe it or not."

Jack sat up quickly. "Her? Miss perfect is lost? Never thought I'd hear that! Figured she had a plan for her entire life."

"You always assume, Jack. You never ask. Why is that?" Shepard asked quietly, not wanting to feed the hyped emotions.

Jack growled. "Because. Asking gets you close and close gets you taken advantage of... or dead"

Shepard shook her head. "Only in the wrong circles, Jack. You asked me about Pragia, and I'm doing it for you. I'm not using it to take advantage of you. I'm doing it so you can stay focused and come back from this mission alive. That's all I want. I want us to come back alive."

Shepard hopped up and sat on a crate before she continued. "You know, Miranda's leaving Cerberus when this is done. We've opened her eyes to shit like Pragia, the trap on the Collector vessel, the fact that TIM is all about power instead of improving humanity. She's done with it... and she really was disgusted by the Pragia report. Even though she personally never had anything to do with any of the biotics cells, she wants to help destroy the facility. I think it's her way to absolve her own sense of responsibility. Like she feels she should have known what was going on there, and didn't."

Jack was silent for a few minutes and finally whispered. "I guess I can understand her need to see it. To really see the kind of shit the Illusive Man does in the dark." Jack flopped back onto her cot. "Sometimes you don't see it coming until the knife is stuck in your back."

Jack rolled and faced the wall, falling silent. Taking the hint, Shepard hopped down from the crate and returned to her quarters for the night. She had an early morning appointment with Karin for the third of her cybernetic enhancements, the heavy bone weave. The insertion of the skeletal lattice would make her bones practically unbreakable; being a Vanguard, such an upgrade was worth every
The journey from the Citadel to Aite was a long one. They had to make a triple-relay jump followed by a number of hours on the other end to get from the relay to the Typhon system... and then Aite was the second planet from the sun, so add a bit more time once they breached the system. Shepard told Joker to time the trip to last at least two days and to make sure all the extra heat was discharged before they got to Aite. Dealing with a complete unknown, she wanted to make sure they arrived with full stealth capability, just in case. She utilized her mandatory rest time after the surgery to draft update messages to send over the burst transmitter and discuss the plan of attack for Project Overlord with Miranda and Tali. TIM had decided to play nice and provided coordinates and access codes to the main facility, Hermes Station. Shepard had grimaced when she heard the name, wondering which Hermes they were getting... the fleet messenger of the gods or the conductor of souls to the afterlife. Given the nature of Cerberus, she figured it was most likely the latter.

Shepard took a light scout team down first in the Hammerhead hover vehicle. It only held three, so it was her, Tali and Miranda. As soon as they hit the ground and disembarked, a Dr Gavin Archer was on the comms talking about an urgent, catastrophic VI breakout. Shepard's mind immediately went to Earth's Luna station, where they faced a rogue VI that had taken over the Alliance low-gravity training facility. They had just faced drones there, Shepard didn't want to think about how bad Aite could get if they had to face teams of VI-networked Geth.

Archer skipped the details and told them they were facing exactly that and they had less than five minutes to retract a communications dish before the satellite entered the broadcast window and the VI would be able to get off-world. He gave them directions and the task was quick and easy to accomplish, but as soon as the dish was pulled down and settled into its cradle, the station's electronics started going haywire and a large, green image appeared before them, growling in a harsh synthesized voice, "Quiet! Please! Make it stop!"

Archer's voice came back on the comms again. "Damn it! The VI has overridden the controls and is trying to realign the dish so it can upload its program off-planet. We have to stop it! The only way to ensure it can't transmit is to physically destroy the antenna inside the dish!"

The control room had a huge view window and it was easy to see their destination, so the team began working their way through the station. Every large view screen they came to, the composite green image appeared and shouted the same thing at them, over and over again. As the team worked their way toward the tram that would take them to the communications hub, they started coming across the bodies of dead workers and evidence of burns caused by Geth pulse weapons were prominent on the walls. The team encountered the first resistance as they approached the tram platform. Tali quickly hacked a Juggernaut, which helped them tremendously by taking down a number of Troopers and some Geth Pyros before it fell.

They boarded the tram and the minute it started moving, Tali turned on Miranda. "You wonder why people don't like Cerberus? It's because of things like this! We created the Geth over three hundred years ago and it cost us our homeworld! But you think you're better; that you can somehow understand and control the Geth better than the Quarians who invented them! You're arrogant and automatically assume you can succeed where all of us stupid aliens fail! You'd better pray we stop this thing from getting off-world or the Humans may be the next to see their homeworld taken away from them!"

Miranda stared at the Quarian, momentarily at a loss for words. "You think I condone this? This is someone experimenting on rogue Geth, not improving Humanity! It's projects like this that are
Miranda hadn't told anyone on the crew about her plans to leave Cerberus except for Shepard, so the comment brought Tali up short. "You're what? Leaving Cerberus?"

"Yes, I am. The Illusive Man's gone too far; apparently on more projects than I realized. Playing with dangerous technology with little to no oversight. Experimenting with VIs and AIs. Experimenting on children." Miranda's face twisted in annoyance. "It's disgusting and irresponsible."

Tali was quiet for a moment, then whispered. "I'm sorry, Miranda. I still believe what I said about Cerberus being arrogant, but obviously you are no longer the blind operative I met on Freedom's Progress. Good for you!"

Shepard could hardly believe what she was hearing, but had no time to take advantage of the breakthrough. The tram had arrived at the next station and they had a rogue VI to stop. The communications annex was more of what they had run into at the main hub. They were almost immediately accosted by Geth and had to dive for cover. Tali launched Chatika and the drone provided a great distraction while the team blasted the Troopers into oblivion. They were also operating on catwalks, high above ground level, so Miranda's slams and Shepard's throws were particularly effective at picking off the Geth and tossing them to their destruction without using up thermal clips. They worked their way quickly into the main communications facility and found the stairs up to the antenna, but the place was crawling with Geth defenders. The team quickly fought their way to the stairs and as they emerged at the top, Shepard realized they were actually standing inside the huge satellite dish, the antenna before them stretching up into the blue sky above. Dr Archer was obviously monitoring their progress because his voice instantly came over the comm, "You need to destroy the support struts now. They have their own capacitors; try blowing them up!"

The plan worked like a champ, except Dr Archer forgot to mention one little detail; when the third of four supports was destroyed, the link to the satellite was severed because the entire dish started to collapse, not just the antenna. The team suddenly found themselves in a scramble for their lives, running as fast as they could back toward the tram platform and leaping for safety as the satellite dish crumbled away beneath their feet. As they crashed to the platform, Gavin Archer ran out to meet them, "Over here!"

Shepard rolled to her feet and pointed her arc pistol at his face as she growled, "What the hell is going on around here?"

Archer skidded to a stop and gulped. He closed his eyes so as to not see the shot if it came and answered quietly. "Man's reach exceeding his grasp."

Shepard holstered her pistol and rumbled. "You'd better start explaining."

Archer immediately complied and wove a tale of linking a Human to a VI interface that would allow direct communication with the Geth at a command-structure level. The goal was the creation of a hybrid Human-VI that would eventually enable Humanity to control all Geth. The project was on its way to failure until Dr Archer discovered that his autistic brother David, who was a mathematical savant, could already communicate directly with the Geth. In theory, connecting David to the VI would enable him to give instructions and commands to multiple Geth simultaneously. When the Illusive Man threatened to cut the project's funding, Dr Archer ignored all established safety protocols and surged ahead, hooking David up to the VI and forcing him to become the Human half of the hybrid before the interface programming security testing was completed.

Somehow, the VI half of the hybrid overpowered David's mind and turned hostile, controlling the Geth and killing most, if not all, of the scientists working on the project. It was now attempting to
escape the confines of the closed system by launching itself off-planet via the communications network. With the destruction of the satellite dish, the situation was temporarily under control, but it would be a simple thing for the VI to instruct the Geth to repair the dish. Shepard looked at Miranda and did nothing but raise an eyebrow. Miranda shook her head. "You know we have to finish this, Commander. This is an abomination."

Before the commander could answer, Tali exclaimed, "Keelah! Now it makes sense!" When the other two team members looked at her questioningly, she gasped. "Don't you get it? The voice! It was yelling 'Make it stop.' David Archer wants out! He was forced to merge with the VI against his will!"

Shepard's hand involuntarily went to the grip on her pistol as she spun to Archer. "Tell me we can disconnect him!"

"I would assume that's possible, but the VI has barricaded itself within the lab at Atlas station and locked down the entrance. The only way to reverse the lockdown is to enter override codes at each of the other three stations... but all the personnel at the other stations have been killed by the Geth! There's no one to do it. I can do the one here, but we'll need people at both Vulcan and Prometheus Stations as well."

Shepard made a call to the Normandy and requested a second team to respond to Prometheus Station. "It's a crashed Geth ship, Garrus. It was Cerberus' source of all their Geth platforms. Bring Kasumi for her tech skills and overload. You and she can overload like crazy and then Grunt and Zaeed can rip 'em apart. Leave Joker in charge of the Normandy."

Upon confirmation of the orders, Shepard and her team climbed into the Hammerhead and blasted off for Vulcan Station, the geothermal plant that provided power to all four of the Cerberus outposts on the planet. With only one quick stop at a boosting station that was protected by only a few mechs, they progressed easily on their way, the lava flows and defensive turrets proving to be greater challenges, but nothing insurmountable.

The main power plant was a different story. As they progressed through the plant, they ran into a variety of defenses. After a few standard mechs, they encountered a slew of rocket drones and Tali's hacking ability and Miranda's overload became key skills. The upper level was a repeat of the first floor, with the added excitement of a heavy mech, but nothing they couldn't get by with relative ease. The control room only had a single mech in it, attempting unsuccessfully to destroy the override panel. Miranda quickly destroyed the mech and confirmed the override panel was still operational.

As Garrus piloted the shuttle to the coordinates for Prometheus Station, he pulled up into a hover. Looking down into the valley, he saw a huge Geth defense cannon with a barrier covering it. Surrounding the cannon were four barrier generators. The Geth cannon was incredibly slow, designed to take out large ships versus faster moving small targets. As such, it was easy to evade and the shuttle's forward mounted mass accelerator cannons made quick work of the barrier generators and then, once the defensive barrier dropped, the cannon itself. Garrus set the shuttle down on the available landing platform and the team moved quickly inside. As The entire group moved uneasily through the station; they were surrounded by immobile Geth platforms that seemed ready to activate at any moment. They knew the Prometheus was Project Overlord's source of Geth subjects, but it was still discomforting. It was like walking through a graveyard and waiting for the zombies to wake up. It was made worse when Kasumi tripped one of the logs and a disembodied voice echoed through the ship. "Lanigan just ran a simulation - - if these Geth wake up, there's a 98% chance that we will be dead within two minutes. I'm starting to hate Lanigan."
Grunt bared his teeth in what everyone assumed was a smile, based on his mood. "He, he, he. Now, that would be a worthy fight!" His glance traveled to Garrus. "Think they'll wake up while we're in here?"

Zaeed was the one that answered, "Better hope not, but if they do, we'll give them one hell of a time. It'll be no different than the Broker ship, just killing Geth instead of mercs."

Garrus just continued onward, using his sniper rifle to shoot out all the surveillance cameras as they went. He said it was just target practice, but they all knew better. They were chasing something that had control of all the electronics systems on the ship. Garrus was attempting to blind the VI. The next log stirred mixed emotions, but the one most interested this time was Kasumi. "Halloween was yesterday. Lanigan ran around wearing spare Geth parts. Spooked the shit out of everyone. Now I definitely hate him."

Though no one could see it under her hood, the master thief's eyes lit up. "Oohhh. Now THAT's an idea!"

Garrus couldn't help but chuckle. "Never understood that Human holiday. Just stay out of engineering. Guarantee you; show up looking like a Geth and Tali will shoot you with her shotgun."

They moved on and finally found the central control room. The override control was on the far side of the room and the floor between the door and the control consisted of moving panels that were not in the correct configuration to reach the override. Kasumi stepped up. "Piece of cake. You should see the stuff they have in museums for their storage units. This is only two dimensional. Museum systems also have a vertical component and they store the more rare and expensive relics in the upper layers. Generally requires a two-person team to access them; one to ride the lift while the other runs the controls... but they're easy enough to hack and then control from your omnitool. Ride and drive at the same time."

By the time Kasumi finished her explanation, the floor panels were where they needed to be and Zaeed was already crossing the bridge she had created.

Garrus looked at Grunt and Kasumi. "You two stay here and make sure nobody moves the bridge on us. Zaeed and I will handle the override."

When Garrus called in and told them they were in position, Shepard linked in Dr Archer. "Alright everybody. Ready. Override in three... two... one... engage!"

On her command, three override switches were pushed in and locked together. In response, a Geth unit in the Prometheus control room suddenly activated. Kasumi grumbled, "And there's the catch. Just like Hock's vault. He let us in, but then tried to keep us from getting out." As she finished speaking, she activated her overload and the first Geth's shields failed. Grunt was ready and waiting and quickly blew it away.

Garrus got on the comms. "Shepard. The Geth on the Prometheus are taking exception to our actions. They're waking up and we'll have to fight our way back out."

Shepard's team was already running full tilt back to the Hammerhead. "We're coming, Garrus! Stay safe and we'll pinch them between us!"

The big Turian shouted back. "No! Get your team to Atlas station and take the whole damn thing down. We'll be fine."

As they climbed in the Hammerhead, Shepard hesitated. "Garrus."
"We're fine, Shepard. Overloads and heavy weapons. We're tearing through them. Go to Atlas Station and end this." Shepard heard the bark of Garrus' sniper rifle and his trademark "Scratch one!" before his comms cut off.

"Damn it!" She glanced at Miranda, "What are the coordinates for Atlas Station?" She entered them into the navigation system as Miranda read them off to her, then punched the thrusters for the Hammerhead, heading toward the main laboratory for Project Overlord. You'd better be fine, Garrus, or I'll kill you myself!

They made their way to Atlas Station and got inside easily enough, but as soon as they entered, Dr Archer chimed in with troubling news; the VI was trying to upload directly from the main server at the station. The team had to get there and shut it down before it was able to complete the connection. As they moved through the facility, doors began to open, close and lock on their own and Shepard recalled one of the recordings Garrus told them about. It seemed the VI was herding them in some particular direction and Shepard wasn't sure if it was toward a trap or in answer to the odd electronic voice's request to 'make it stop.' She quickly became convinced it was a trap when they arrived at a room with an elevator and a Geth Prime emerged when the doors opened. Fortunately, it was accompanied by only two Geth troopers, so was easily defeated. When they got on the elevator however, it malfunctioned, rising and dropping erratically, tossing the team into the air then slamming them to the floor as the floor vanished from beneath their feet only to sudden rise quickly and smash into them again. Shepard cussed when the thing finally quit moving and the team was able to struggle to their feet and climb out before it took them for another unwelcome ride.

They slowly worked their way through a maze of corridors, never knowing which door would open when they keyed a panel; the VI was continuing to guide or corral them to some undetermined final destination. Along the way, they listened to a number of logs recorded by a number of the technicians on the project. Each one highlighted the project's lack of progress and the increased desperation of Dr Gavin Archer. They eventually reached a room with yet another lift platform, accompanied by a warning of the elevator exceeding the maximum lift capacity. Shepard glanced at her team. "Find cover and be ready! I'll bet we've got a couple more Primes inbound on that platform when it shows up!"

Her guess wasn't far off, but again, the team of three easily overcame the Geth force and was soon on the elevator. Tali grimaced. "I've already sprained my wrist and cracked my faceplate. I can't say I'm excited about another elevator ride, Shepard."

Shepard frowned at her with worry. "You need to sit this out, Tali? I don't want anything to happen to you over Cerberus stupidity. I need you for the real mission."

Tali answered the question with a shake of her head and a couple of quick strides to join Shepard and Miranda on the platform. "Not a chance, Shepard. Just because I'm not looking forward to it, doesn't mean I'm going to abandon you."

Shepard grinned at the Quarian in thanks as she hit the button and the platform started to descend. The lower level revealed some type of rotating shield and Tali gasped. "That looks remarkably like a simplified version of my cyclonic barrier technology!"

She immediately turned to Miranda and even though neither the operative nor Shepard could see Tali's expression behind her faceplate, they were sure she was glaring daggers at Miranda. Miranda jumped to her own defense, "I swear, Tali! I did not pass them that information! I don't know how they got it, but it wasn't through me!"
"Hmph. For some reason, I actually believe you." Tali looked back to the orb glowing inside the barrier. "Let's end this, Shepard."

Shepard's attention was also focused on the central orb. "By the Gods! I think that's David Archer in the middle of that thing! How the hell do we stop it without killing him?"

Before anyone could even begin to postulate an answer, the automated VI announcement system informed them the upload to the transfer station had begun and the data tubes lit a bright orange with activity. The team could physically identify the data transfer packets and quickly destroyed the pathways carrying them and then, out of options, fired on the barriers protecting the core. The barrier was quickly destroyed and when it dropped, Shepard couldn't believe what she was looking at. David Archer was hung in some strange contraption, tubes and harnesses connected directly to his body providing the nutrients to sustain him and the pathways for his neural interface with the Geth network. The sight was revolting, and she abruptly realized the electronic voice they had been hearing wasn't electronic at all in origin. Tali was right; it was David Archer begging to be freed. With the transmission cut off and the barriers removed, David's voice finally came through loud and clear, no longer distorted by the VI trying to assume control.

"Quiet. Please. Make it stop."

As the team approached, Miranda gasped. "My God! He can't even close his eyes! They have clamps on his eyelids!"

As Shepard started to speak, Dr Gavin Archer came running into the room. He must have left the protection of Hermes Station as soon as the override had been completed and hurried over to intercept them. As he ran up, he was shouting, "Wait! Commander! I beg you, don't do anything rash!"

Shepard spun and glared at the man. "Rash? Like forcing your own brother into an experiment?"

Archer assumed something of a penitent posture as he tried to explain. "I know how this must look, but I never intended any harm to come to him. You must believe me! It's not like I planned this. It was an accident."

The commander's face twisted in disgust. "How can stuffing your brother into that contraption be an accident?"

Archer shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "Seeing David communicate with the Geth? It all seemed harmless."

Shepard stepped threateningly toward the doctor. "And what? Somehow, before you knew it, you were running your own private hell?"

Archer took a step back and got defensive. "I had no choice! The demands were incredible. The Illusive Man doesn't broker failure."

Tali pulled her shotgun up until it was pointing at his back. "So there's the truth of it. You cared more about disappointing the Illusive Man than about your own brother, you Bosh'tet!"

He turned to the Quarian, "No! You of all people should know that any war we fight with the Geth will be bloody! I was asked to find a way to avoid that."

Miranda glanced at Tali and quickly pointed her pistol at Archer's head, just in case the argument caused the Quarian to hesitate. "And how many have you already sacrificed for this project? In addition to your entire staff dying, that is."
Dr Archer's shoulders sagged and he looked down at the floor. "More souls than will ever forgive me." His head came back up and he crossed his arms as he faced his brother, David. "But I won't apologize for radical ideas. If my work prevents a million mothers having to mourn a million sons, my conscience will rest easy."

Shepard snorted in disgust. "That's the trap. You'll sell humanity's soul for a promise of a better future that may never come, and it will never be worth it in the end." Shepard shook her head. "You sound just like fucking Saren. You've all but sealed your brother's fate. You know Cerberus will never leave him alone. He'll always be a lab rat."

Archer's face betrayed no expression as he answered. "But a well cared for lab rat."

Shepard practically exploded and smashed the butt of her pistol into the side of Archer's head, knocking him down. Her face turned deep red with anger as she shouted. "You call that..." She waved her hand toward the contraption holding David suspended in the center of the room, "well cared for? You are one warped son-of-a-bitch!"

Archer struggled back to his feet, one eye already starting to swell closed. He almost sounded contrite. "The damage may not be permanent. He might recover some semblance of his mind."

Shepard's fist was still clenched around her pistol grip as she snarled at the doctor. "Not if he stays here. What's your plan to help him?"

It took Archer a long time to answer, his one-eyed gaze returning to his brother in consideration. Before he opened his mouth to reply, his mathematical savant brother spoke, "Square root of 906.01 equals..."

Archer hung his head as he finished the equation. "30.1" He blinked a few times before speaking again. "What I've done to David is unconscionable. If he dies, it's unforgivable." His head came back up and he looked at Shepard. "I have no way to change my path, not and keep us both alive."

David spoke again. "Quiet. Please, make it stop."

Shepard glared at Archer. "I've seen and heard more than enough of your cruelty to know he'll never be free from it here. I'm taking him to Grissom Academy to see if they can help him."

Archer suddenly snapped back to his Cerberus loyalties and shouted, "No! Leave him! He's too valuable!"

The doctor went to draw his pistol but he wasn't near quick enough, nor was he far enough away from Shepard to attempt such a move. The commander's free hand lashed out and grabbed the pistol along with the hand holding it, giving it a wrenching twist. Archer cried in pain and dropped to his knees as the bones in his wrist crumbled under her synthetically enhanced grip. She pointed his own pistol back at his face. "If you even think about coming after your brother, this bullet will be waiting for you... but not until after I break every other bone in your body first."

Archer tried the last leverage he thought he had. "What is the Illusive Man going to say about this?"

Shepard huffed and turned away. "The Illusive Man can fire me if he doesn't like it."

As they disassembled the machine and freed the man who used to be David Archer, Shepard could only hope that the doctor was right and David would eventually remember who he used to be. For now he was sadly a broken shell, stuck in a repeating verbal loop. "The square root of 912.04 is 30.2. It all seemed harmless."
It would have been more time efficient to get Pragia out of the way, but David Archer required specialized care which Karin Chakwas was unable to provide, so the Normandy ended up making the big loop from Aite to the Academy and back to the Nubian Expanse. There was no short or quick route to take, so Shepard once again visited Karin and had the doctor complete yet another cybernetic enhancement, this time a double skin weave. The commander endured her two days of mandatory bed rest and still had time to spare. She even managed to convince the good doctor to release her to the loft for the rest period, and it provided more than enough time to get caught up on all her messages as they hopped through multiple systems on their journey back and forth across the galaxy. She was particularly pleased with the update she got from Liara.

*Test success w/minor adjustments, Feron/Rakhana operational. Other 2 ships in work. Plan: Prep ships, transfer ops to mobile net, break down main node for reassembly on Normandy.*

Shepard sat back and contemplated their current situation, realizing they were close. Once they were done on Pragia, it was time to hit the relay... all the contractual side missions would be complete. She started to write a note to her mom and screeched to a stop when a sudden realization hit her. She stood and made her way to the Bridge. "Joker. I need the comms for a ship-wide broadcast. I also need you to record it and send it to all crew, so those who are sleeping will also receive it."

Joker looked back at her with a knowing glance and a quick nod. "Aye aye, Commander." After a few button pushes and screen slides, he nodded again. "All yours, Ma'am."

Even though no one on the ship but Joker could see her, she stood tall as she started to speak. "Attention, Normandy. I know I've never addressed the entire crew at once, but these are unusual times." As she spoke, work across the ship ground to a halt, everyone stopping to listen, some even standing and staring at the closest speaker that broadcast her voice. "We are enroute to Pragia to finish our last contract. Once we are done, we'll be going to a derelict Reaper to pick up an IFF that will supposedly take us safely through the relay. You've all worked hard to get us this far and I'd love to be able to promise that I'll get you all home safely, but the best I can do is to promise you that I'll do my best to do just that. We all signed on for a suicide mission, but we've made a lot of improvements to the ship and I have every intention of coming back home. For those of you that have family or someone special, if you want to leave a final message for them, to be sent in the event of our unfortunate demise, you should draft those messages now and send them to me. I will pass them to Dr T'Soni for safekeeping, to be transmitted in the event of our failure. However, it is my fullest intent to speak with her again when this is all over, to tell her she need not send any of them. Not one more lost. Thank you for your service. Shepard, out."

She looked to Joker and dragged her hand across her throat in a cutting motion so he would terminate the broadcast. Joker's face was a mix of emotions. "You really think we'll succeed, Shepard?"

Shepard's eyes were like a cold, frozen sea as she looked back at him. There was no doubting her conviction. "I've already died once. It was NOT pleasant. I have no intention of doing it again anytime soon."

"Good." Joker stared out the front window. "I've got family on Tiptree so you'll get one from me, you know, just in case. But ya know what? What I'd really like before we go is a hamburger. Not some vat-grown crap, but a real, honest to God dead cow. Any chance of that happening?"

Shepard actually smiled as she shook her head. "Afraid not, Joker. Don't see us getting to any Human agricultural settlements between now and then, just to grab a burger." She laughed, "But thanks... Now I'm going to be craving a hamburger for the next month." She shook her head as she
left the Bridge to walk the ship. Joker knew her well; if he needed reassurance after the speech, the rest of the crew probably did too.

On the original Normandy, Shepard had walked the ship after almost every mission, but on the new Normandy, packed with Cerberus personnel, she plainly didn't feel the same connection to the people who staffed the various positions. It was probably somewhat bad for morale and knowing they were coming closer to the final confrontation, she felt the need to fix that as best as she was able with the limited time remaining. Cerberus or not, these people had volunteered for a declared suicide mission and offered up their lives to fight the Collectors. At the very least, she owed the crew her loyalty and her best effort toward that end. As she left the Bridge, she stopped and talked with every one of the crew manning the various surveillance, sensor and communications nodes. She had overheard many conversations on her way to and from her visits with Joker in the cockpit, so tried to remember the bits and pieces as she spoke to each individual. She wasn't surprised by their reactions. Most of them were shocked, but eventually admitted they felt she'd hardly even acknowledged their existence, and none expected her to know anything about them. They were pleased when she came up with little tidbits like where they were from or family member names... especially when those family members had been at colonies hit by the Collectors and Shepard promised to do her best to grant them some form of resolution to their pain, be it rescue or, at the very least, revenge.

By the time she was done, she realized she had done the crew a gross injustice over the past months. With few exceptions, most of them were simple grunts faithfully doing their jobs, with no stake in Cerberus politics, Human galactic dominance or the Illusive Man's anti-alien agenda. They were there because their families were at risk. She'd let her own bias against Cerberus affect her judgment of the individuals onboard when she should have known better. TIM would have been sure to select only the most liberal Cerberus personnel, or go out and recruit additional people like Karin and Joker when they had no one up to the task of tolerating the aliens TIM knew Shepard would bring on board. He'd had two years to put a crew together that would satisfy her. He had known he wouldn't even get the recalcitrant cooperation of the commander if he had packed the ship with Cerberus xenophobes. As she started to make her normal rounds with her ground team, Shepard shook her head in disgust and vowed that if they survived this mission, she'd be better at considering people as individuals. They'd need a lot of allies for the Reaper war, so she'd have to be prepared to accept help of all kinds, no matter where it came from. If she could consider a Krogan Battlemaster as a brother-in-arms and befriend a Rachni queen, she could accept a few Cerberus personnel.

Her first ground crew visit was with Garrus. He'd been mostly keeping to himself since Haestrom and Shepard had been tipped off by both Jacob and Yeoman Chambers that she might want to stop in and speak with him about more than the mission. When the door of the Main Battery slid open, the big Turian stood in his normal spot as he tinkered with the calibrations on the Thanix cannon. "Hey Garrus. Got a minute to talk?"

Garrus glanced at her. "Is it important, Shepard? I already forwarded notes for my dad and sister to your box, and I'd like to finish up the dual cannon calibrations before we hit the Relay. I want this baby singing when we take on the Collectors."

"Yeah. I can understand that..." Shepard, however, didn't back off. "but I do need to talk. Or maybe you need to talk to me?"

Garrus paused and turned to her, his mandibles flaring in what Shepard interpreted as confusion. "And what would I need to talk to you about?"

Shepard sighed. Garrus wasn't volunteering anything, so She was going to have to push the topic of contention. "Tali?"
"Oh." Garrus looked down at the floor for a moment, as if he was trying to see the engineering deck below. "Yeah. Things didn't exactly work out like I planned, Shepard, but it's not going to affect the mission."

"Okay, but I don't really care about the mission right now, Garrus." Shepard shook her head. "Well, I do, but that's not why I'm asking. I'm asking about my friend, Garrus Vakarian, not my weapons officer." She paused for only a moment before asking, "You alright?"

Garrus sighed. "Yes. And no." He looked up at his commander and friend and realized that whatever lingering doubts he had about her finally vanished in that moment. With that one question, he was finally sure he really was talking to the Samantha Shepard of old. "It's hard. I thought we had something, but two years is a long time. You patched things up with Liara pretty quick and I guess I was hoping for the same ending with Tali and I. But I respect Kal'Reegar. He's a hell of a soldier and I can't fault her choice. And I'm the one that left, to go with Liara, and when that fell apart I wallowed in my failure instead of returning to the Citadel or to Palaven and trying to find her. It may have already been too late, but I blame myself for not even trying."

Shepard paused only briefly before speaking. "And that's the worst part of it, isn't it? That you didn't try, so you don't know if you could have made things any different." It was Shepard's turn to sigh. "I understand regret, Garrus, but don't let it drag you down. I know I was pretty adamant about going to Illium, but it scared me to death... and two years is a long time. The only thing that gave me hope was that Liara and I were already promised. I don't mean to hurt you, but I talked with Tali just after she came on board and she had no idea how you felt. According to what she told me, all you two had was a deep friendship with potential. Nothing intimate. You can't beat yourself up over maybes and might-have-beens."

"Yeah, you're right... I never told her. Never said anything about how I felt about her back then. And other than sharing a dextro diet, Quarians and Turians have pretty different cultures. We're a bunch of stick-up-the-ass, by-the-book military types with all our rules and regulations, and the Quarians are rule-by-committee socialites." Garrus actually chuckled. "Probably had as much chance of success as Joker beating you in hand-to-hand."

"Sooooo... you ok with that?" Shepard's mood perked up a bit in response to the Turian's laughter.

"Yes. I am. Thanks, Shepard. Sometimes you just need a little help to see when something is out of your reach." Garrus turned to the console he was working at. "And I need to finish these calibrations so we can blast those damn Collectors into nothing but space dust when we pass through the relay."
After Garrus booted her out of the Main Battery, Shepard made sure to visit the rest of her crew, not in the least bit surprised to find both Samara and Thane quietly meditating and Kasumi flipping the pages of one of her old hardcover books. What did surprise her was the multilateral effort going on in the Armory. Grunt, Zaeed, and Mordin were all there with Jacob and they had every type of weapon laid on the bench. They were sharing secrets and weapons' mods they had garnered over time to do everything they could to max out each weapon's capabilities. Shepard provided them with the few tricks she had learned from her N-school training and Vanguard experience before leaving them all to their work. She was delighted with how well the team was working together to improve their ground capabilities and their chances at survival.

When she finally worked her way down to the bowels of Engineering, Jack was a different story. "What the hell, Shepard? How come you didn't take me down to the planet?"

Shepard looked at the biotic, ripples of energy coursing across her skin. "Because of a number of reasons, Jack." She shook her head. "Number one, I had to take Miranda, and the hammerhead only holds three. And it's Geth, so had to take Tali. Plus, given what just happened with Miranda, no way I was putting you in such close proximity with her. At least until I know I can trust you to work with her."

"Fuck that." Jack took a step closer and got in her face. "That's lame, Shepard, and you know it. I could have gone with Garrus when you called the second team down. What's your pitiful excuse for that?"

Shepard didn't budge and growled, "Stand down, Jack." They stared at each other until Jack finally took a step back.

"Still waiting, Shepard." Jack gave ground, but the expression on her face didn't change.

Shepard let out a deep sigh. "I needed folks with overload to take down the Geth."

"Bullshit. What about Zaeed? I coulda gone in his place! You know Grunt and I work great together." Jack sat down in disgust. "You robbed me, Shepard. I was ready to blow up some serious Cerberus shit."

Shepard laughed and then held up her hands in apology when she saw the expression on Jack's face. "Sorry, Jack, my bad. I honestly didn't realize it was that important to you... but you'll get your turn. We left that one standing, but we're now on our way to Pragia. This one's all yours, and by the time we're done, it's just going to be a smoking hole."

"Fine." Jack flopped back on her cot. "There's just not enough shit to do on this bucket. Too much sitting around and thinking, now that I know about Eden Prime and Pragia. I don't think, Shepard. I do."
"Got it, Jack. And don't worry. From here on out, we'll have plenty to do." Shepard smiled cautiously at the grin that spread on Jack's face with that statement and headed back upstairs.

Shepard returned to the loft with mixed emotions. While Jack's volatility worried her just a little, she felt she made a lot of progress with the rest of the crew, both the support personnel and her ground crew, but it didn't alleviate her growing feeling of isolation. On the old Normandy, she always ended her walk-about with a very special stop... Liara's quarters behind the med bay. The few familiar faces she had with her now were great, but not having Liara aboard and by her side left a hole that plainly couldn't be filled. She walked to her desk and ran her hand softly across Liara's photo, wishing the Asari was here, but knowing she couldn't risk taking her lover through the Omega-4 Relay. Liara's words, uttered somewhat unintentionally in a sleep-hazed moment of candor, resonated deep in her soul. *Don't die.*

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Aethyta sat on Tevos' couch staring at the wall. *The damn Reapers are in the Bahak system! A whole fleet of ships like Sovereign.* The Matriarch realized they probably had less than a year before the Reapers would show up on their metaphorical doorstep and her daughter would be right in the middle of it all. She wasn't sure whether she should be thankful or hate the commander for hauling her daughter into the center of the storm. On one hand, Shepard had undeniably drawn her daughter into the biggest war they had ever known, but at the same time, Liara was probably in the safest place in the galaxy, being at Shepard's side. Her attention was brought back to the task at hand as Tevos spoke. "Aethyta. I need you to go to Thessia and do what you do best. Stir the pot. Ready the House T'Soni commandos for the upcoming war and talk to the other Matriarchs. Make them see. Urge them to get ready. We cannot rely on my ability to swing the Council. The best Anderson and I will manage is to draw attention. We are only half the vote and cannot force action with a tie."

Aethyta's gravelly voice was pitched with disbelief. "I don't know what you expect me to accomplish. The Matriarchs have never listened to me before, why would they start now? Especially if we don't have the support of the council."

Tevos hung her head. "I know, Thyta, but we cannot stand by and just let the ruin of Thessia happen. If no one else, at least speak with Matriarch Lidanya. I will tell her you are coming as a personal envoy. She was at the helm when Sovereign nearly destroyed the Destiny Ascension. Shepard's call for the Humans to intervene is what saved her ship. She should respect any warnings we bring from the commander and will do what she can to prepare the fleet. If the end comes, I at least want to go to the Goddess knowing we did all we could."

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As the Normandy rolled into orbit around Pragia, Shepard, Jack and Miranda boarded the shuttle. Jack was amazingly subdued and quiet until they could actually see the planet's surface through the viewport. "If it wasn't for the automated defense lasers, the plant life would cover the entire facility in a matter of days. I forgot how much I hate this place. It was a mistake coming back here."

Shepard glanced at her calmly as she spoke, "Relax, Jack. It's not a mistake. You need to do this... so you can move on. Pragia needs to be relegated to your past, and we're here to help you put it there."

Jack hung her head and then spared a quick glance at Miranda before focusing on the commander. "Yeah, I know. Thanks. Let's just get on the ground and get this over with."

As they approached the facility, they could barely see it buried in the jungle. Jack growled, "Don't get close to the plants. Cerberus just couldn't control themselves and had to mess with them too. They mutated the poisonous stuff for hyper-growth to make the planet less habitable. They didn't
want any competition moving in. Assholes."

The trio entered the facility and it quickly became apparent they weren't alone when they passed a recent varren kill and wondered who had shot it. The other thing that became apparent was that what Jack remembered was a child's stilted view twisted by years of nightmares, which wasn't to say her opinion of Cerberus was wrong; she just remembered some of the details incorrectly. Shepard was surprised by some of the recordings, indicating they were in fact keeping secrets from TIM, but when Jack commented on them, Miranda refused to rise to the bait and no arguments ensued. The only comment she made was after Jack pointed out a fighting arena and explained how the guards pitted her against the other kids in duels to the death. Miranda was shocked and had to make sure she understood what Jack was saying. In an incredulous voice, she asked, "They rewarded you for killing the other children?" Upon Jack's confirmation, Miranda's face twisted with disgust as she muttered under her breath, "That's... despicable."

Jack frowned in confusion, not truly ready to accept Miranda's support. "Let's just get in there and plant the bomb in my cell. I want to watch this place burn."

Shepard nodded in agreement. "Roger that, Jack. We've got things to finish. The sooner you put this behind you, the better."

The team moved onward through the facility and eventually ran into a merc group. Given the secrecy surrounding the facility, Miranda was somewhat surprised and wondered how anyone could possibly stumble upon it out in the middle of nowhere. The answer to that question was provided when they got closer to their destination. As they entered into the main control center, they were met by a group of mercs that included three Krogan and a number of Vorcha. The Krogan who was apparently in charge called in, notifying someone named Aresh that the 'intruders' had arrived. Aresh told him to kill them, but the mercs were no match for the Normandy team and soon enough the trio stood at the door to Jack's former cell.

Once they got inside and confronted Aresh, Jack didn't believe his story about being another Teltin survivor; she had absolutely no recollection of him from when she was there. Miranda's brow wrinkled in consternation. "It makes sense, Jack. How in the hell else would he have found this place? In all your years here, no one ever found this facility by accident."

Jack agreed, but her grudging acceptance of Aresh ended there, especially after he talked about rebuilding the facility in order to find out what answers Cerberus was seeking. Aresh glanced around the room in wonder. "I'm going to find out what they knew. How to unlock true biotic potential in humans. I'm restarting the Teltin facility."

Jack instantly came unglued; she whipped her pistol out and promptly aimed it at Aresh's head. Shepard's hand shot out like lightning and she gently gripped Jack's forearm. "Slow down Jack and think for just a minute..." Her gaze shifted to Aresh, her voice reflecting the confusion she felt. "You'd put more kids though the same torture that you were subjected to here?"

Aresh nervously scrubbed the back of his neck. "They did such horrible things to us! It all had to have a purpose... Didn't it?"

Jack's hand was starting to shake and she was barely able to resist pulling the trigger. "Are you nuts? If you lived through that shit, there's no way you'd do this! There's no reason good enough for what they did to us! I can't believe you'd start this up again!"

Shepard shook her head and looked sorrowfully at the second victim of Pragia. "Sorry, Aresh, but we can't let you restart this facility. If you want to make something of your experiences, the Alliance has the Grissom Academy now and I'm more than happy to give you a ride there. This facility is
going to be nothing but a smoking hole in the ground when we leave here. There will be no rebuilding."

Jack lowered her pistol and laughed at the image that statement brought to mind. "Yeah. Two days from now, this place will be nothing but overgrown plants that are just as likely to eat you as any varren that were running around in here, and a hell of a lot harder to kill. So, you can go to Grissom or you can stay here and die. I don't care either way."

Aresh hung his head. "Fine. I can't stop you, so do what you will." He let out a deep sigh and walked from the room. After Jack placed and primed the bomb, they caught up to him on the roof, staring out at the jungle that would soon swallow the remains of the Teltin Facility. They all watched from the safety of the shuttle as the facility exploded into nothingness as they returned to the Normandy.

As soon as Shepard returned to the CIC, Yeoman Chambers grabbed her attention. "Commander Shepard. Tali'Zorah seemed very distraught after receiving a message while you were off-ship. I think you should check on her down in Engineering."

Shepard's eyebrows rose. "Did she give any indication as to what it was?"

Kelly shrugged her shoulders as she answered, "No, Ma'am, but she let out a string of words that I'm sure were expletives, but the translator couldn't pick them up." Kelly frowned and her brow knitted with worry. "Her voice actually sounded... more scared than angry."

Shepard scowled at that; she wasn't a big fan of the Yeoman's purpose on board the ship, but Chambers was pretty perceptive to emotions and even though her relationship with the Quarian was relatively new, she could probably read Tali as well as Shepard could. The commander had intended on returning to her cabin to put together some dispatches, but headed directly to Engineering instead. Tali was at her normal terminal, but her fingers were frozen on the keyboard instead of moving at their normal lightening speed. Shepard stepped up beside her and spoke gently. "Hey Tali. You doing ok?"

The Quarian didn't move, other than her head drooping just slightly. "Shepard. I'm glad you came by. I may need your help. I just received a message from the Migrant Fleet. The Admiralty Board has accused me of treason."

"What the hell could it be? Is it because you're working with Cerberus?" Shepard could think of no other possible reason for such an outlandish charge against the dedicated Quarian.

"I'm not working with Cerberus. I'm working with you. And you saw the message. I got leave to serve on the Normandy again." Tali shook her head in bewilderment. "I have no idea what they're accusing me of. You'd think I would remember if I'd betrayed the Fleet!"

The commander's brow pinched in concern. "What happens when a Quarian is accused of treason?"

"There's a hearing, with members of the Admiralty Board acting as judges. We're family. This is just
the worst kind of family meeting. My father is an admiral on the board. He'll have to recuse himself from judgment. I can't even imagine what he's thinking right now. Or Kal. Keelah!" Tali's voice actually picked up some strength and sounded almost angry. "The punishment for treason is exile. If they convict me, I can never go back!"

"And you have no idea why they're accusing you?" Shepard thought it a bit odd that they'd give no details on such a damning allegation.

"None. The specifics of charges like this are rarely discussed on open channels. I won't know more until I get to the flotilla." Tali let out a heavy sigh.

"So when do you need to be there for this hearing?" Shepard already knew she would do whatever was required to help her teammate.

Tali's shoulders sagged with the weight of the charges against her. "They'll wait a reasonable period of time for me to come and defend myself. It's much less formal than an Earth trial or anything you'd see on the Citadel, but eventually, if I don't show up, they'll try me in absentia."

Shepard pursed her lips and thought for a moment before answering. "I need you focused on the Reaper IFF mission, Tali. If you hadn't been with us on the Collector ship, we probably wouldn't have made it off alive." She looked at Tali and offered an encouraging smile. "Let's go find the Flotilla and get this sorted out."

Tali bowed and shook her head. "I was going to book passage on another ship. After your announcement, I didn't think there'd be time for you to help. Thank you, Shepard."

Shepard patted her on the shoulder. "You're an amazing engineer, Tali. This mission would come to a stop without you." Shepard grinned. "Besides. You're my crew and a good friend. No way I'm leaving you on your own for this."

Tali's voice sounded significantly lighter as she continued. "The Flotilla is currently over in the Eagle Nebula with salvage crews on Korlus. I'll give Joker the coordinates and let the Admirals know. Are you sure about this, Shepard? The Admirals will be waiting on us once I send the message..."

Shepard didn't even hesitate. "Absolutely, Tali. Since we're going to the Eagle Nebula though, give yourself an extra day so we can swing by Grissom and drop off Aresh on the way." Shepard hesitated before finishing. "And Tali... You know that whatever happens with the Fleet and this hearing, you'll always have a home on my team. Always."

Her throat suddenly tight, all Tali could do was nod.

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Shepard's next stop was with Miranda to let her know about the treason charge levied against Tali. Miranda agreed that her technical and engineering skills had been key to their mission success on the Collector vessel and quickly agreed with Shepard's decision to rendezvous with the Fleet. "But we can't delay too long, Shepard. I think three days at most, before we need to head to the Reaper to collect the IFF."

Shepard's head bobbed. "Yeah, I know. Hopefully, their 'hearing' is faster than a traditional Human trial." She made direct eye contact with Miranda. "But you have to know, I won't leave Tali there alone. If we leave, she comes with us. One way or another."

"Understood, Commander." Miranda never flinched. "And for what it's worth... I agree."
The trip gave Shepard enough time to squeeze in what she thought might be her last cybernetic enhancements, the muscle weave and the fifth of seven available skin weaves. Thinking back on Liara's words, she wouldn't complain about the pain they cost her as long as the weaves delivered as promised and allowed her to make those 'seemingly impossible jumps' and continued to reduce the damage done by weapons' fire. It was all about survival and making it back home to the one she loved.

As they approached the Migrant Fleet, Shepard called Tali to the Bridge. She looked to her obviously nervous crewmate and quietly asked, "What exactly happens if you're convicted?"

"Like I told you before, I'd be exiled. The specifics are up to the judges. If it's deemed only a tragic mistake in judgment, the guilty party might receive a small ship and supplies. Not that it really matters. Either way, if I'm convicted, I'll never see the Migrant Fleet again." Tali sniffed and her head dropped. "And most likely, Kal."

Shepard shook her head. "Don't worry about that for now, but know that if it comes down to it, he's also welcome on the Normandy. He's a hell of a soldier."

Tali shook her head. "He'd never leave the fleet." She looked at Shepard. "Could you ever leave the Alliance?"

She was surprised when the commander actually laughed. "Asks the Quarian of a Council Spectre standing on a Cerberus vessel." Her laughter died and she answered more seriously. "Tali. If I'm ever forced to choose between the Alliance and Liara? I'll be seeking asylum on Thessia faster than you can change a suit filter. There's no question in my mind."

Tali was silent for a moment before replying. "Well. Alright then. Let's hope we don't have to make Kal let one or the other go."

Shepard got them back on track. "So. Convictions don't result in prison? And there's no death penalty?"

"We don't have a planet, so we don't have the spare resources for long-term incarceration. A monitored work detail is more effective. And the Quarian population is so small, we can't afford executions. An exile can still have children, and those children are welcomed back to the Fleet. They are not judged for their parent's actions."

Shepard frowned for a second, thinking about the stigma Ash carried because of her grandfather. Not only did Humans judge, but they carried it through multiple generations. "How often does something like this happen?"

"It's rare. It must be something that affects the entire flotilla, not just one ship." Tali thought for a moment, digressing through her memory. "The most recent one was Anora'Vanya vas Selani, an engineer who handed over Fleet defense schematics to the Batarians. She had good intentions. The Batarians were contracted to upgrade our systems, but they passed the defense schematics to a pirate gang."

"Ouch." Shepard shook her head. "Was she convicted?"

"No. She made a suicide run on the pirate gang. She destroyed them before they could attack the Fleet. She was pardoned... posthumously. Let's hope I don't have to prove my innocence that way."

"Oh shit." Shepard abruptly felt the sting of guilt. "Tali. Could this be because you provided us with
the advanced barrier technology you developed? I mean, technically, we're Cerberus."

Tali answered slowly. "I... I don't know, Shepard. I suppose that's a distinct possibility. Damn it! I didn't even think of that." She shook her head. "If that's the charge, I'm guilty."

"Well, think of it this way." Shepard tried to make light of the situation. "If that's the case, with the trip to the Collector base, we have the suicide run defense in the bag."

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After Tali authenticated with the fleet and they arranged for a security and quarantine team to meet the ship, they finally got to dock with the Fleet. They were met by a full squad of Marines and a representative from the Admiralty. "Captain Shepard. Captain Kar'Danna vas Rayya. Tali'Zorah told me a lot about you. I wish we could be meeting under more pleasant circumstances."

After a brief discussion about her being addressed as Captain, Shepard understood it was a title of respect, reflecting her command and the people who relied on her leadership and judgment to keep them alive. It had nothing to do with her rank or current lack thereof, within the Alliance military. Once the pleasantries were out of the way, Shepard got straight to business. "What are the charges against Tali, Captain?"

Kar'Danna got straight to the point. "The charges are that Tali brought active Geth into the Fleet as part of a secret project."

Tali stepped forward. "That's insane! I never brought anything but parts and pieces! I grew up on your ship, Captain. You know I'd never do that!"

Shepard was shocked, "You sent Geth parts to the Fleet?"

Tali nodded. "Yes. My father was working on a project that required materials for testing, but everything I sent was inactive. I triple-checked everything. I was careful!"

"Technically I'm supposed to place you under arrest, but I won't do that." Kar'Danna shook his head. "So, Tali... you have to stay on the ship until the hearing is completed."

Both Tali and Shepard responded at the same time, "Thank you, Captain."

He nodded and indicated the hearing would begin as soon as they were ready, and recommended they immediately join the judges in the garden plaza. With a nod, Tali indicated to Shepard she was ready to start, relieved that there was no mention of the cyclonic barriers. They rounded the corner to the garden plaza entrance and Tali immediately brightened. "Auntie Raan!"

As Tali stepped forward to give the woman a hug, Shala'Raan spoke. "Tali'Zorah vas Normandy. I'm glad you came. I could only delay them for so long."

Tali immediately stepped back. "Wait. What do you mean? vas Normandy?"

Shala'Raan shuffled her feet nervously. "I'm afraid so, Tali. The Admiralty Board moved to have you tried under that name, given your departure from the Neema."

Shepard stepped up. "I realize we haven't been introduced yet, but I'm Samantha Shepard, Tali's current captain. Is the ship designation important?"

"Keelah! Forgive me. Shepard vas Normandy, this is Admiral Shala'Raan vas Tonbay. She's a close friend of my father, so will also have to recuse herself because of her connection to my family." Tali
nodded. "But to answer your question, yes. Stripping me of my ship name is practically declaring me exiled already."

Shala'Ra'an was clearly a friend. "It isn't over yet, Tali. You have friends here who still know you as Tali'Zorah vas Neema. No matter what the Admiralty Board says. And I may not vote, but I am the moderator, so can make sure they have to follow the rules of protocol. I'll ensure you get a fair trial."

Shepard nodded. "Well, we know which way they're leaning, so we go on the offensive. Does Tali have a defense counsel? Someone who speaks for her, or is she on her own in there?"

Ra'an nodded and her voice was steady. "Indeed she does, Captain Shepard. By Quarian law, the accused is always represented by their captain."

Shepard took a step back. "Uh. Ok. I'm not so sure that's a good idea. I don't know your legal system. Is there any type of exception to get her a real representative?"

Tali cut off Ra'an's response. "No. There isn't. They're trying to turn the crowd against me by assigning me the name of a Cerberus ship. The whole trial is a farce, but I don't care. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have speak for me, Shepard. If you can talk Wrex down while his shotgun is pointed at your head, you can handle a few Quarian Admirals."

"Tali. You do us an injustice." Ra'an's voice sounded disapproving. "You still have friends here, as well as enemies. We got the trial delayed and kept you from being tried in absentia, and got them to allow a Human in to represent you. Don't waste your chance here out of spite."

Shepard practically growled. "Oh, don't you worry about that. They'll hear the truth, whether they want to or not. And so will every Quarian present in the audience. They'll sense a set-up if that's what it is, and the Admiralty won't get away with it."

Ra'an nodded in approval. "Good. Now, I promised I would not delay you. We need to go in."

Tali had called it a hearing, but it had every appearance of a tribunal if Shepard ever saw one. The accused had a low table and the three judges sat before them on an elevated platform. Even the spectators had elevated seating. Shepard felt like she was standing in the center of an old Roman Gladiator arena. This is appropriate. This is a fight for Tali's life in the Fleet!

As the trial got started, Shepard learned the official name of the gathering was a Conclave and the first official act in the proceeding was a protest against Shepard's presence. The middle judge threw his hand up. "Objection! A human has no business at a hearing involving such sensitive military matters!"

Ra'an came through on her promise to do what she could to protect Tali's right to a fair trial. "Then you should not have declared Tali crew of the Normandy, Admiral Koris. By Quarian law, as Tali's Captain, Shepard must stay."

Koris was subdued as he quietly withdrew his objection, but his body language reflected everything but agreement with the decision. When Shepard was asked if she was willing to speak for Tali, she took advantage of that observation. "I shouldn't have to. When Tali helped me stop Saren and his Geth army, her actions spoke for themselves. Without her help, none of you would be alive to put her on trial today."

The Admiral on the right nodded. "Well said, Shepard. None of us should forget Tali's contributions to the Fleet."

Shepard continued. "Agreed. But I have to say that while I am her current acting Captain, Tali's heart
is with the Quarian people and she's still a proud member of the Migrant Fleet. My only regret is that
the Captain of the Neema has been forbidden to speak on her behalf."

Koris immediately got defensive and stepped forward aggressively. "Nobody has been forbidden
from anything! It is simple--"

The Admiral on the right spoke again, this time with disdain. "Lie to them if you must, Zaal'Koris,
but don't lie to me and expect me to stay silent! The Human is right!"

Raan cut in to prevent a public argument. "Admirals! Please. Shepard's willingness to represent
Tali'Zorah in this hearing is appreciated. Let us not get off track and drag out the hearing any longer
than necessary."

When the charges were read and Tali denied them, Koris again stepped forward and pointed at Tali
in anger. "Then explain how the Geth seized your father's ship and killed everyone on board!"

The crowd roared to life, a hundred discussions exploding at the same time as Tali loudly blurted out,
"What are you talking about? What happened?"

The friendly Admiral stepped forward. "As far as we can tell, Tali, the Geth have killed everyone on
the Alarei... your father included."

Tali rocked back in shock and Shepard exploded. "This is bullshit! How can you justify springing
this on Tali in the middle of a damn trial? She deserved to be told of this ahead of time! I thought you
valued family!"

Raan shook her head, "Our apologies. Tali should have been informed."

Tali looked at the commander, "Shepard! We have to take back the Alarei! My father..."

Shepard offered her a quick nod and returned her attention to the Board. "You said 'as far as you can
tell.' Does that mean you haven't taken back control of the Alarei? There could still be survivors?"
Shepard stared at them, incredulous. "You're holding this trial while the Geth actively control a ship
in the middle of your Flotilla? This is unbelievable!"

The admirals didn't even bother to deny the allegation as Shepard continued. "The Normandy stands
ready to assist in any capacity necessary. Screw the trial. Your first concern should be the safety of
the Fleet!"

If Shepard could have seen his face, she was sure Koris was grinning in victory, knowing he'd just
lured them all into his trap. "We tried to take it back without success. The safest course at this point
would be to destroy the ship... but if you are looking for an honorable death instead of exile, we can
wait for one more attempt." He almost sounded happy about the proposition.

Shepard had no time to respond as Tali shouted, pointing at Koris in anger. "I'm looking for my
father, you Bosh'tet!"

Shepard scoffed. "This isn't about an honorable death. We cleared Haestrom without too much
difficulty; we can take back the Alarei. The Fleet comes first, and Tali needs to find her father. I have
no doubts my team will succeed."

The unknown admiral on the right spoke again. "Agreed. And if you die on this worthy mission,
Tali'Zorah will be cleared of all charges."

Koris turned his way and ground out, "We'll discuss that later!"
Raan cut them off from yet another argument. "Be safe, Tali. This hearing will resume upon your return."

Koris grumbled a continuation. "Or upon our determination you've been killed in action."

On their way to the Alarei, Shepard asked Tali about the various admirals, learning Zaal'Koris vas Qwib Qwib was in charge of the Civilian Fleet and Shala'Ra'an vas Tonbay controlled the Patrol Fleet. The seemingly friendly admiral was Han'Gerrel vas Neema, in control of the Heavy Fleet, and Tali's previous Captain. It certainly explained his cordial attitude toward Tali. The admiral that had been silent during the entire trial was Daro'Xen vas Moreh and was in charge of special projects. Tali warned Shepard that out of all of the admirals, Xen was probably the most dangerous. She also told the commander to not judge Koris too harshly. Being in charge of the civilians, he always favored peace, and an event like this would surely be a prelude to war with the Geth. He was probably at a loss for how to stop such a thing from happening and his mood reflected his feelings of helplessness. As much as she disliked the Quarian because of his abrasive attitude, Shepard grudgingly realized she could relate to that sentiment.

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Knowing they were going up against the Geth, Shepard had called for everyone who had overload capability, which included Garrus, Miranda and Kasumi. She added Jack to the list as an afterthought, which actually worked out very well. Once the Geth's shields dropped, Jack used her shockwave to toss them like bowling pins and the team of six quickly powered their way through the Alarei. They didn't finding anything that would exonerate Tali... and what they did find was not welcome news, figuring out that Tali's father had purposely reassembled and activated the Geth. One of the logs mentioned him by name, claiming that Rael'Zorah was convinced they'd have a viable weapon against the Geth in less than a year. The evidence was damning. Tali shook her head sadly. "If this is all true, my father has done a horrible thing, Shepard, and I provided him the pieces to do it. None of this shows I wasn't directly involved."

Shepard placed her hand on Tali's shoulder. "We're not done here yet, Tali. We'll find something."

They pressed on, clearing the Alarei room-by-room, passage-by-passage until they finally located Rael'Zorah. Shepard looked on silently as Tali shouted out, "Father!" and ran to his corpse. "No, no, no! You always had a plan. Masked life signs, or, or an onboard medical stasis program maybe. You! You wouldn't..." She fell on her knees next to the lifeless body. "They're wrong! You wouldn't just die like this! You wouldn't leave me to clean up your mess! You can't..." Tali started crying as her voice faded to silence.

Shepard's heart was breaking as she reached down and grabbed Tali's upper arm, "Hey. Hey, come 'ere." Shepard pulled her up into a hug.

"Damn it. Damn it. I'm sorry." Tali pushed away from Shepard's embrace.

"You've got nothing to be sorry about, Tali. I don't care what he did. He was still your father." Shepard shook her head. "I just hope he left something behind we can use to clear your name."

Tali drew a shuddering breath. "Maybe... He would have known I'd come. Maybe he left a message!"

She knelt back down and pulled his omnitool toward her and activated it. It immediately played a recording of Rael'Zorah's last words. "Tali. If you are listening, then I am dead. The Geth have gone active. I don't have much time. Their main hub will be on the bridge. You'll need to destroy it to stop their VI processes from forming new neural links. Make sure Han'Gerrel and Daro'Xen see the data.
They must..." There was the sound of gunfire and the recording ended abruptly.

Tali's head was hung low as she uttered, "Thanks, Dad."

Shepard spoke quietly, but it still sounded amazingly loud in the silent ship. "He knew you'd come for him and he was trying to help you. I know it's not what you wanted, but it's the best he could do. He gave you everything he had left to give. Absolution."

Shepard thought about when her father had died and she could do nothing to save him. It didn't matter that she wasn't at fault. The words were empty. Absolution meant nothing compared to the love of a father, lost forever. "He loved you, Tali."

"I don't know what's worse; thinking he never really cared, or knowing that he did, and that this was the only way he could show it." Tali turned from her father and faced Shepard. "It doesn't really matter. I cared, and now he's gone... and one way or another, we're ending it today." She turned and walked away. "Let's shut down that hub."

The six-man team easily worked their way to the bridge and past the four Geth guarding it. Tali walked directly to the main console and logged on. She spoke while she worked. "This controls the hub Father mentioned. Disabling it will shut down all of the remaining Geth we missed." Her hands hesitated briefly. "It looks like some of the recordings remained intact. They'll tell us how this happened, exactly what my father did."

Shepard noticed that Tali's hands had stopped moving. "You don't really want to know, do you?"

Tali spared her a glance. "No. But I know we have to. I just... this is terrible, Shepard! I don't want irrefutable evidence that my father is... was... one of the worst criminals in Quarian history!" Her voice grew quiet. "I don't want confirmation that he was a part of all this."

Tali played the recording and it was obvious her father led the research and was also responsible for keeping it a secret from the Admiralty, in spite of the risks involved. Tali gasped when her worst fears were realized, when she heard her father confirm what he had done. "No, we're too close. I promised to build my daughter a house on the homeworld. I'm not going to sit and wait while the politicians argue."

Tali shook her head in disappointment, but let the recording play on. In spite of what Rael'Zorah had done, he was adamant about protecting Tali. When one of the researchers suggested he ask Tali to start sending working material, he didn't even hesitate. "Absolutely not! I don't want Tali exposed to any political blowback." He left no room for doubt as he continued, sealing his own fate in the process. "Leave Tali out of this. Assemble new Geth from what we have available. Bypass security protocols if need be."

As the recording ended, Shepard shook her head. "I'm so sorry, Tali. He did this for you, but I know you'd rather have your father than a house on Rannoch."

"Keelah, Shepard. I never wanted this." She turned her back on Shepard and took a few steps away. "Everything here is his fault. When this comes up in the trial, they'll..." She spun back and stepped quickly to her captain. "We can't tell them! Not the admirals, not anyone!"

Shepard shook her head. "No. Tali, without this evidence you're looking at exile! I can't let this go and let you sacrifice yourself for a dead man. I'm sorry."

"You think I don't know that? You think I want to live knowing I can never see the Fleet again? Maybe lose Kal'Reegar? But I can't go back into that room and let them hear this!"
Tali was too upset to listen, but Shepard tried anyway. "Rael'Zorah doesn't want your protection, Tali! He wants you protected from the politics of it all!"

Tali sighed heavily. "You don't understand us, Shepard. They will strike his name from the manifest of every ship he ever served on. He will be worse than an exile... he'll be the monster in cautionary tales to our children. A traitor to our people!" She threw her hands up in frustration. "I can't let all the good he did be destroyed for this one lapse of judgment while trying to save our homeworld. I just can't, Shepard. Please."

Shepard glanced at the group, all of whom had remained silent up to this point. Miranda shook her head. "Why don't you wait until you get back to the trial? Maybe you can find some way to convince them without having to use this. You won't know unless you try... for Tali's sake."

Tali gave her an appreciative look before turning back to Shepard. "You're my captain, Shepard. It's your decision, but please... don't destroy what my father was." She gestured at the door. "Come on. If we take too long they'll declare us dead and decide how they want, evidence be damned. If that happens, none of this will matter anyway."

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Tali was right. As they walked in, they heard Raan speaking, "Very well. Is the Admiralty Board prepared to render judgment?"

Shepard's face turned into a scowl. "Hey! Wait just a minute! We're not dead. You didn't wait very long before declaring us a lost cause. You can go get your damn ship."

Tali glanced at her, and then turned to the admirals, her voice laced with sarcasm. "Sorry we're late."

Admiral Gerrel looked pointedly at Koris as he spoke. "We apologize, Shepard. Your success in taking back the Alarei is... very unexpected."

Raan's voice was filled with joy. "But also very welcome!"

Gerrel continued as if Raan hadn't even spoken. "Did you find anything on the Alarei that could clarify what happened there?"

Shepard and Tali looked at one another and the commander hedged her bets, saving the damning evidence as a last resort in an attempt to grant Tali her wish. "We got your ship back and the Fleet is safe, the rest shouldn't matter. Tali's achievements are the only evidence you should need. That she was willing to risk her life to do so proves her loyalty to the Quarian people."

Koris wasn't willing to give up so easily. "Her loyalty was never in doubt. Only her judgment."

Shepard's tone was mocking. "Seriously? Defeating Saren and the Geth isn't enough? Taking back the Alarei isn't enough?" Shepard shook her head. "All you really need to know is I'm her captain and I trust her with my life."

Koris was fuming. "We still don't know what happened on the Alarei!"

Shepard waved her hand dismissively at Koris. "No, Admiral, you don't. And you don't need to. You gave her my ship's name and I'm telling you on my word as her Captain that she's innocent."

Koris shouted his response in anger. "These are formal proceedings! That is insufficient!"

Shepard had enough and finally yelled back. "You have GOT to be kidding! Just what evidence are
you claiming is insufficient? I give you Tali's exemplary record of service with the Fleet. I give you one of the heroes of the Citadel. We give you back the Alarei! Where's your evidence of her guilt? You don't have any! You present trumped up charges with no proof. You slander her character and can't even bother to tell her before the trial that her father is dead!"

Shepard paused and glanced back at the audience. "Look at them! All of you! All they care about is their war with the Geth. They don't care about Tali. This whole trial is a sham!"

Her focus shifted back to the admirals. "Not a single part of this trial was ever about Tali. It's a lame excuse to debate the merits of war! None of you give a shit if Tali's life and the good name of Zorah get destroyed in the crossfire!"

She had shocked the room into silence, leaving the admirals stammering for some type of response to regain control of the situation. She threw her hands in the air in disgust. "Do whatever you want with your fleet, but leave my crew out of your political bullshit!"

She stepped forward and glared at the Board. "You can accept Tali's and my word, or you can exile the woman who saved the Citadel from the Geth. Just make your decision and quit wasting our time."

Suddenly Veetor'Nara nar Rayya stood up. "Wait! Shepard is right! Tali saved me on Freedom's Progress. She doesn't deserve to be exiled."

Kal'Reegar stepped up and joined him. "Damn straight. Tali's done more for this Fleet than you assholes ever will. You're pissing on everything I've fought for. Everything Tali fought for. So, if you exile her, you might as well do the same with me, because I'm leaving with her."

Veetor nodded in emphatic agreement. "Me too!"

The crowd was in an uproar as the Admirals looked on in amazement. Daro'Xen immediately recognized what the commander had just accomplished and raised her omnitool, entering a not-guilty verdict. She had no desire to lose her admiralty position through the vote of no confidence that would imminently follow if they found Tali guilty. Koris saw what she did and glanced in the other direction, just in time to see Han'Gerrel do the same. Finally, he too pulled up his omnitool and entered a verdict. The room grew suddenly still, in quiet anticipation. Shala'Raan spoke quietly. "Tali'Zorah. In light of your history of exemplary service to the Fleet, we do not find sufficient evidence to convict. You are cleared of all charges." Her focus shifted. "Commander Shepard. We cannot thank you enough for taking back the Alarei and for representing one of our people."

Shepard looked at Tali and stood tall, her voice filled with disdain. "With all due respect, Admiral, I didn't represent one of your people. I represented one of mine."

Admiral Gerrel's voice reflected honest appreciation as he answered her. "So you did, Shepard."

Raan quickly cut in before things got out of control. "This hearing is concluded. Go in peace, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy. Keelah se'lai."

As the group dispersed, Tali turned to Shepard in amazement. "I can't believe you pulled that off. "What you said..."

Shepard looked at her and finished the sentence, "...was nothing more than the truth, Tali."

The dumfounded Quarian shook her head. "I've never had anyone speak like that on my behalf. Thank you for being there for me." She glanced downward. "And for defending the honor of my father when you had absolutely no reason to."
"You asked me to. For me, that's reason enough." Shepard smirked. "But if you're disappointed, I'm sure we can go back in and get you exiled if you want."

Tali actually laughed. "Thanks, but I'm fine with things like this. It's fun watching you shout."

Kal'Reegar stepped up. "I'd have to agree. You put on quite the show, Commander."

Tali clasped his hand. "You didn't do so bad yourself, Kal. Thank you."

Kal shrugged. "Figured I had to say something when you didn't use the evidence you found on the Alarei."

Tali frowned. "I didn't say anything about finding evidence, Kal."

Reegar grinned. " Noticed that, Ma'am. But you? Not finding what you're looking for... especially with Shepard along? Wouldn't believe that for a minute, but I'm sure you had your reasons. And as the commander said, that's reason enough for me."

Shepard nodded in approval. "Any idea what your next assignment's gonna be, Kal? I'd be happy to request you for the Normandy."

"Hmmm." Reegar glanced at Tali before he answered. "That's tempting, Commander, but I'm still on the Dark Energy project. It's not finished yet. And you're right; we're probably headed for war with the Geth. The best bet would be for us to find another way, but I can't leave my fellow Marines if the Admiralty is thinking about trying to take back Rannoch."

Shepard stuck her hand out. "Sorry to hear that, but I respect your decision. Take care of yourself, Reegar."

Kal took her hand. "Will do, Shepard. And you take care of yourself and yours. I expect to get Tali back in one piece."

Shepard smiled. "I promise. Now..." She shifted her glance to Tali. "Take a few minutes. I'll wait for you back at the dock."
Captain Kar'Danna was still on the docks when Shepard returned to wait. "Thank you for defending Tali'Zorah, Captain. You did better than any Quarian captain could have, given the circumstances."

"I did what any decent commander would do for one their own... and Tali's been an incredible asset in our battle against the Reapers. I need her focused." Shepard shook her head at his surprise. "I know you don't have much say in how things work, but use what influence you can to not start a war with the Geth. The Reapers are coming, probably within the year, and you can't afford to have your resources strained or diminished when they get here."

Danna stared at her for a few seconds before responding. "So, you think the rumors are true?"

"No. I don't think anything. I know. So does Tali." Shepard sighed. "Contrary to what you hear, Sovereign wasn't an advanced Geth ship. It was a Reaper and the Council saw fit to cover it all up. Even now, the Collectors are using Reaper tech to harvest Human colonies in the Terminus and the Council is keeping that hushed up too. Tali sent the fleet proof in the recordings from Freedom's Progress." Shepard saw Tali headed toward them, so finished up. "Let go of the battle over Rannoch... at least for now. You won't have a planet to take back if we aren't ready for the Reapers."

Kar'Danna shook her hand. "I'll take that under consideration, Captain Shepard." His focus shifted to Tali. "Congratulations, Tali'Zorah. I'm pleased you still stand among us." He looked back to Shepard as she confirmed Tali was ready to go. "Fly safe, Shepard. May you stand between your crew and harm as you lead them through the empty quadrants of the stars."

When they were back on board, Tali thanked Shepard one last time before returning to Engineering, both for her trial defense and for the bit of alone time with Kal'Reegar, no matter how short it may have been. As soon as Tali stepped into the elevator, Shepard went directly to the Bridge to speak with Joker for a long overdue chat. "Flight Lieutenant Moreau."

"Shit, Commander. What'd I do this time?" Joker frowned at her tone as he glanced back over his shoulder at Shepard.

Shepard stepped up beside him and looked to the left, where Edi's holographic display normally popped up. "Edi. You listening?"

Jeff made a scathing sound in his throat as the AI answered, "I am always listening, Shepard."

Shepard scowled at the pilot. "Can it, Jeff. That's one of the reasons I'm here. Front and center, Edi." Shepard began when the holograph popped up. "We're about to head to a supposedly disabled Reaper." As Jeff started to open his mouth, Shepard pointed at him and only said one word,
"Don't," before dropping the finger and continuing. "I hope it's dead, but scientists don't go silent for no reason, so I want us in full stealth mode with maximum stay capability when we get there."

"Aye aye, Commander." Jeff was concerned by the commander's attitude so played it safe and stayed quiet, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He didn't have to wait long.

"When we were at the Collector ship, you two decided to have an ill-timed pissing contest and it endangered this ship." Shepard's face held a deep scowl and her voice was crisp and hard. "Edi... You're an AI, who by definition is supposed to be able to think for yourself... and your operations parameters dictate that you protect this ship and its crew. Flight Lieutenant... Your title suggests a particular skill, one which I hear you brag about repeatedly, yet you failed to provide accurate navigational guidance or take appropriate action to get us to safety in a timely fashion. The behavior of both of you was unacceptable."

Shepard's glare went back and forth between Edi's holographic projection and Joker. "From now on, everywhere we go, before we get there, we will have a pre-designated emergency bug-out location, somewhere else. Someplace in a different system where the Normandy can just go, that you don't have to think about, or talk about, should the need arise."

Shepard's voice got rather loud at this point, and while everyone on the entire flight deck probably heard her, she didn't care. "So next time someone starts shooting at us with advanced weaponry possibly capable of killing us with a single shot, instead of having some stupid childish game of one-upmanship, you can get us the FUCK away from it, to safety!"

Her voice dropped significantly in volume and changed to a low, dangerous tone. "Do. I. make. myself. perfectly. clear?"

Joker shrunk into his seat and pulled his ball cap down lower over his eyes. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Perfectly clear, Commander." Edi hesitated only briefly before asking, "Where would you like our emergency rendezvous location to be for the Reaper IFF mission, Shepard?"

"Not my job. You two start playing nice and figure it out. Before we get there. And I expect professional behavior from here on out... I won't be so nice if we have this conversation a second time." With that, Shepard turned on her heel and stalked out of the cockpit.

As she left, she heard Jeff already bitching. "Thanks a bunch, Edi. You don't have an annual performance evaluation that just got trashed."

Edi immediately countered, "You are the one that failed to provide a suitable navigational..."

The doors closed, leaving the commander in blessed silence as she made her way to the loft.

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Shepard pulled out a datapad and started drafting her 'farewell' messages. She had received a number from the crew already and she needed to write her own. She had a half dozen to complete, even without writing one for Liara. If Shepard wasn't able to see her Asari again before the relay trip, she would call Liara and speak to her in person; a letter just wasn't enough. She did need to send out a few data burst updates though, and she prepped those first so they would transmit as they cycled the standard relay through Omega, on the way to Hawking Eta. She sent routine updates to Culver, Anderson and her mom, and two bursts went to Liara; one business, one personal.

Crew writing final farewells just in case. Plan to send those required when I return. Will pass you copies of all for safe keeping/distro, in case worst happens. So very sorry to ask this, Love.

Shepard had scratched out her letters to Hackett and Anderson fairly quickly, but the one to Sharon Culver took a lot longer than she had anticipated. The commander would always have a special place in her heart for her sister-in-arms, but they hadn’t seen each other since Shepard came back. There just hadn’t been an opportunity and it was difficult to figure out how to say goodbye when she hadn’t even really had the chance to say hello. She had finally gotten something down that was at least close to what she wanted to say when Joker chimed in on comm. When they had dropped out of the relay at Chandrasekhar in the Hawking Eta cluster a few hours prior, they had cruised to Hebat. It was a methane-ammonia ice giant, and it would be their last chance to discharge any excess energy for the stealth system. Once they jumped FTL to the Thorne system, the only planet was Mnemosyne and it was a brown dwarf that actually radiated more heat than its sun; no place to 'cool their jets,' so it would be straight to business. Joker's call was to notify the commander they were ten minutes away from dropping out of FTL near Mnemosyne... and the Reaper in orbit around it.

They were boarding a Reaper, so Shepard took a full squad of six, with the remaining ground team members on the shuttle with them, ready to provide back-up and secure their exit point if necessary. Garrus was the first team's sniper, Kasumi was the infiltrator and Mordin would provide tech and medical. The remaining three, Grunt, Samara and Shepard, would be the muscle. Except for the commander, they were all preloaded in the shuttle and ready to rock and roll. Shepard, however, was standing on the bridge looking out the front viewport as they dropped into orbit. She let out a long, low whistle at what greeted them. Orbiting Mnemosyne was the expected two-kilometer-long ship with the unmistakable profile of a Reaper, but a second ship was alongside it, which Joker quickly identified as Geth. Shepard swore under her breath. "Just what the hell we needed. Probably explains the scientists going quiet. Damn it! "What have we got, Edi?"

"The Reaper is giving off power signatures in localized areas, but they are far weaker than what a ship of that size should require to operate. The powered sections are most likely work areas set up by the Cerberus researchers sent to discover the ship's secrets. I am also detecting a mass effect field. Most likely, that is what is keeping it from tumbling to the planet's surface, Shepard. The logical conclusion is that the Reaper "died" and was reduced to minimal functionality a long time ago."

As the AI fell silent, Shepard thanked her for the information and hurried to the shuttle. As soon as she boarded, they departed the Normandy and prepared to enter hell.

As they entered the first hallway, it was obvious the science team had been working on the Reaper for quite some time before they went silent. The inside of the vessel looked like any other space station and Shepard was sure that wasn't how they found it. It had taken a dedicated effort to put everything together. Garrus chuckled and spoke quietly, "Exploring an abandoned area, expecting something mechanical and nasty to jump out at any moment... just like old times, Shepard." In the eerie silence, he may as well have been shouting.

Kasumi couldn't help but comment in her light, musical voice. "So, Shepard makes a habit of taking her friends to only the nicest of places?"

Shepard's voice was firm, but not punishing. "Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. Let's stay focused, people."
They soon came upon work stations that contained logs of the researchers' progress, including the building of the working areas and an airlock. As the logs progressed, they started to describe feelings of oppression and the crew getting nervous, with a few starting to show symptoms of some type of psychological break. None offered any type of explanation for the behavior. When they opened the airlock to proceed to the outer work area, the entire ship rocked hard and Joker jumped on the comms. "Normandy to shore party. The Reaper just put up kinetic barriers. I don't think we can get through from our side."

Shepard was calm. "Ok, trap number two. Guess we should have expected that. So, we take down the barrier generators while we're here. Any hint where they might be?"

Edi stepped into the conversation, indicating she had detected an energy spike concurrent with the barrier activation. "Sending the coordinates now, Shepard. Be advised. It is the location of the mass effect core, which is also maintaining the Reaper's altitude."

Shepard sighed. "But of course. So we take down the barriers and the Reaper begins its plunge into the brown dwarf and burns up."

"And that means everyone dies. Yeah. Got it." Joker shook his head. "It's always something, isn't it? Can we please just have a normal, non-life-threatening mission for a change?"


Kasumi shrugged. "I can easily hack into the systems and recover all the research logs, but that won't help with the IFF."

Shepard nodded. "Good idea. You hack and copy everything you can, Kasumi. Mordin, you can help her out. It will be a repeat of the Broker Ship." Shepard redirected her comments. "Joker. When we get there, we'll coordinate the barrier drop with you and Edi. Give us directions to the closest exit, and we'll meet the shuttle there to rendezvous with the Normandy."

"Sounds good, Commander. Don't take too long... I don't trust that the damn thing's not waking up! I'll bring the Normandy close, so it'll be a short shuttle ride. Normandy out."

Shepard and the team moved out of the scientific work area and into the main Reaper body. They immediately started finding blood stains and thermal clips, but no bodies. Grunt frowned. "This isn't right, Shepard. Signs of battle, but where are the dead?"

Samara agreed. "Yes. A great battle was fought here and the Geth are not known for collecting trophies. They leave the bodies where they fall. This is very... unusual."

Garrus growled. "Only one thing we've ever run into gets up and runs away after it's dead."

Despite the situation, the commander laughed when Kasumi deadpanned a response to Garrus. "Yes, I believe Shepard is the only one present who has accomplished that feat."

Mordin failed to see the humor in her response and countered, "No. Shepard runs at things, not away. We are speaking of husks. Then again, they attack as well. I believe your statement flawed, Garrus."

"Well. Tell them to quit hiding and come out and fight, then. There is no honor in sneaking." Grunt stomped an impatient foot that rattled the walkway.

"Enough!" Shepard realized the mission just became a lot more dangerous. "The logs. Those
people were becoming indoctrinated. That's why they were hearing things and starting to share memories. We'll have to watch each other for signs. Any hint of it and we bug out. Immediately."

Mordin offered a quick nod. "Yes. Necessary precaution, but not possible with kinetic barrier. Fortunately, don't anticipate necessity. Scientists here for months before silence. We will be only hours. Good to watch, just the same."

As they moved down to the lower levels, they quickly started encountering husks and Shepard was thankful they brought a full team. As they approached an intersection, a couple of shots rang out and husks dropped like rocks. Garrus called out, "Sniper!" The shots stopped as quickly as they began and Garrus grumbled. "Didn't have the angle to see the shooter. Hard to believe it'd be a survivor from the science team... they aren't normally that good with weapons. No offense, Mordin."

"None taken. Recognize special case as prior STG." Given his history, Mordin was certainly not the average scientist.

The team rounded the corner and there was no one up ahead that they could see; the mystery sniper had vanished. They moved out in a spread formation as they came to a large open floor. They progressed about a third of the way into the room before husks began pouring in from three sides and just as it seemed the team was getting a handle on them, a Scion popped up out of nowhere. Samara reached out immediately with a reave, shredding the Scion's armor, and Mordin augmented her biotics with an incendiary tech attack. It went down fairly quickly when Grunt ran in and blasted it's head at close range with his Krogan shotgun. As they reached the end of the platform, Kasumi squeaked out, "My God. What the hell are those?" Her gaze settled on a metal construct in front of them that looked like an oversize sculpture of a spiky sea urchin... except the spikes were piercing the bodies of some of the previously missing mission scientists, suspending them high above the ground.

Garrus answered first. "Your people call them Dragons' Teeth. The Geth used them on Eden Prime. The spikes turn whoever is stuck on them into husks. Then, the spikes retract and we see what I mentioned before. The undead get up and run. If we're still here, they'll be running at us."

Kasumi shuddered. "Then let's plan on not being here, shall we?"

Shepard grimaced. "It won't matter. If the process completes before we leave and they manage to find us, we'll kill them like the rest. I don't want to waste time on maybes. Let's keep moving."

Once Kasumi had collected all the data from the various work stations in the section, the team moved on again, finally passing through another airlock. They emerged onto another long platform and as they started to move forward, three husks climbed up behind them. Before they even realized the husks were there, their mystery sniper let loose. Three shots. Three dead husks. The team stared in amazement as a Geth rose from its firing position, their surprise compounded by its nonaggressive posture, the lowered sniper rifle, and finally an electronic generated voice that said only two words to them before disappearing around a corner. "Shepard Commander."

Even Grunt was surprised. "Geth don't talk."

"And all the ones we've ever fought, we've never seen one operating solo." Garrus flexed his mandibles in confusion as the barrel of his own sniper rifle dropped to point at the floor.

Shepard shook her head. "Did you see that thing? I'm more curious about why it's wearing a piece of N7 armor... and how the hell it knows my name!"

Kasumi whispered. "And it seemed friendly. That's a bit odd, isn't it?"
Samara was the only one who voiced no opinion as Mordin chimed in. "Not friendly. Just not hostile. All aspects highly atypical. Interested in studying such a unique specimen, should the opportunity present."

Shepard pushed the team on. "Times-a-wasting, and we won't figure anything out standing here."

As soon as the team started to move again, scores of husks started rolling in. Shepard parked her shotgun in exchange for her SMG and lit things up with incendiary ammo. The shotgun simply didn't have the rate of fire needed for the number of enemies at hand. The commander had kept a tight rein on her young Krogan, worried he would get too far ahead of the group, but with the number of husks headed at them, Shepard was no longer concerned about that and called out, "Grunt! Time for some real action!"

As Shepard pulled on her biotics and set off on a battle charge, Grunt shouted with glee and plunged in behind her. Garrus swore, instantly knowing what she was doing. Since she picked him up on Omega, he'd seen her in full 'crash and blast' mode only once, on Haestrom, and she had gotten injured. Not knowing how much of a fight yet remained, he couldn't let that happen again. As Shepard careened down the steps to the lower level, Garrus parked himself on the balcony and started picking husks off as quickly as he could chamber a new round. He had no reason to worry. With Grunt down there with her, Mordin using his cryoblast, and Samara utilizing her heavy pistol to kill everything she lifted with biotic pulls and throws, the husks didn't stand a chance. Had Ashley or Kaidan been on the crew, Shepard's actions would have reminded them of Eden Prime. The commander once again dropped into her battle trance and ripped through the piles of husks. She danced and flowed through the enemy, and with her new weaves doing what they were supposed to do, she stepped out the other side relatively unscathed.

Shepard was still thankful to have Garrus and Samara up on the balcony when a Scion stepped around the corner. Between a sniper shot to the head and an Asari biotic reave, it never had a chance to even launch one of its devastating frost waves. As the team moved across the next elevated platform, it was more of the same. Waves of husks, once again supported by a Scion. The same tactics were employed to the same result and the team was soon on its way again, continuing to make steady progress. Kasumi was working hard, trying to keep up while hacking and downloading every terminal she could find, her fingers a blur as they flew over the haptic interfaces. Mordin kept an eye on her, ensuring she wasn't blindsided while she worked. She could move much faster, knowing he had her back.

The next platform was a bit more of a challenge. The same scores of husks, but two Scions. Shepard was forced to cover when she took a hard frost wave from the second Scion, having to give her shields time to recover. There was only one terminal from which to collect data, so Kasumi actually got into the fight, using her cloak to slip around behind them and catch them from the rear with her heavy pistol. The husks were fairly mindless, and didn't even turn as she shot them in the back of the head, but the Scions began to look around to find their attacker. They were slow and cumbersome and it proved their undoing. Before they could get turned, the main body of the Normandy force cut them down, but the team wasn't out of danger yet.

As they moved to the next platform around the corner, yet more husks and two more Scions awaited them. Shepard knelt down behind some cover, breathing hard. She had pretty much exhausted her biotic reserves and had to recoup some energy before she'd be able to get back into the melee, so was forced to rely solely on her SMG. She hated it, but the repeated attacks had forced the issue. Again, she wondered just how many people Cerberus had sent here, but in her heart she knew that couldn't possibly account for all the numbers they were facing. The Reaper was not truly dead; it was just in a significantly weakened state, but was still capable of indoctrination and, obviously, conversion. She shuddered at the thought of how many times people must have discovered this ship and boarded
it, for whatever reason, only to fall victim and feel their minds being taken away from them. She thought of Benezia, of her knowing what was happening and being completely unable to stop it. Shepard growled as she stood back up, letting loose a volley of rounds into the remaining Scion. "Take that, you sons a bitches!"

When the gunfire stopped, Edi chimed in. "Shepard. The airlock directly in front of you will take you to the mass effect core."

Shepard nodded her head. "Thanks, Edi. We're on it."

When they entered the airlock, a lone terminal was in the space. Shepard moved past it and stood by the exit. "Kas. Get that terminal and let me know when we're ready to move."

Kasumi stepped up and started working, her fingers slowing to nothing. "Shep. This isn't just any old terminal. This is the IFF program!"

Shepard spun around, "What? Just sitting out here in the hallway?"

Mordin quickly cut in. "Scientists must have located. Prepped for shipment. Also protected from husks."

Shepard shook her head. "Doesn't matter. Just download it so we can get off this ship. We've been here too long already."

When the master thief had finished the download, Shepard opened the hatch and the team stepped through. The core was directly in front of them, on an elevated platform, along with the mysterious Geth and a number of husks. Shepard shouted out but could do nothing, their access blocked by some type of force field. The Geth suddenly spun and killed the closest husks before returning to whatever it was doing. It was working a console of some type, connected to the core. Shepard wondered if it was trying to drop the ship's kinetic barriers so it could escape and started to worry. "Shit! If that thing shuts down the core, we'd better hope this force field drops with the barriers or we're screwed. We'll never get all the way back through the ship in time!"

Just then, the shield dropped and Shepard realized the Geth had been inexplicably working to allow the Normandy team access to the core. As the barrier dropped, more husks surged out of every nook and cranny and quickly overwhelmed the mysteriously helpful Geth. The team surged forward into the fray. "Mordin! Get that core shut down! We'll keep the husks off you!"

The team set up a defensive perimeter around the Salarian scientist as he worked. It didn't prove that difficult with a five-man team, and Mordin worked quickly. The ship rocked hard, just like it had when the kinetic barrier came up, indicating Mordin's success at shutting down the core. He turned and looked at the inactive Geth. "Shepard. Mission complete. May we take the Geth?"

Garrus looked at him in amazement. "Are you crazy? You want to bring that thing onto the Normandy? Tali will freak!"

Much to Garrus' surprise, as his gaze shifted to the commander, Shepard was already nodding her head in agreement with Mordin. "Yes. Tali said no one's ever captured a Geth intact, and I want to know why in the hell it's been so helpful. I also want to know why it has a piece of my old armor and how it knows my name." She glanced quickly through the squad. "Grunt. Grab that thing and bring it with us."

As husks continued to pour in, the team made a run to the nearest airlock where the shuttle that was waiting for them. As promised, the Normandy hung close by, the shuttle bay doors open and ready,
allowing a swift exit as the Reaper fell into the planet's gravitational well. Just after the Normandy jumped to FTL, the Reaper suffered a core breach and exploded in a glorious ball of fire. They had all gotten away safely, so no one was there to watch it burn.

When the Normandy popped out of the relay at Chandrasekhar, Shepard told Joker to park them in a wide orbit and called one of her old-fashioned team debriefs, pulling the entire ground crew into the conference room, not just those who went on the mission. She signaled silence while Mordin and Kasumi combined efforts to disable all the conference room cameras and microphones. Mordin finally reported to the commander. "Approximately seven minutes before sensors and listening devices come back online, Shepard."

Shepard nodded. "Thanks. No time to waste then, so I'll dive right in. We have an incapacitated Geth locked in..."

Shepard didn't even get to finish her statement before Tali exploded. "You have WHAT?" Even her suit's voice modulator had difficulty controlling the outpouring voice, and her last word came out as a screech.

Shepard almost grinned. "You did say no one had ever captured one... and as I was saying, it's currently incapacitated. And behind a barrier shield in the AI core room.

Miranda chimed in. "It could go a long way toward buying us time with the Illusive Man. They've had an incredibly high bounty on one for a long time. It would be invaluable to their cyberweapons division."

Shepard shook her head. "Which is exactly why we can't give it to him. If there's any advantage to be had from it, we need to take it for ourselves."

Miranda offered no argument and simply nodded in agreement. Understood, Commander."

Jacob leaned on the table. "I'm with Tali'Zorah on this one, Commander. Space it."

"I want to talk to it. To figure out why it speaks, why it knows my name. Hell, the damn thing helped us! I need to know why." Shepard looked around the room and saw mixed reactions, but the only one seeming to echo her sentiment was Mordin.

Grunt shrugged his shoulders. "One pyjak Geth is no threat. If it fights, we crush it like we've crushed all the others."

"Shepard! Those things killed my father! I can't believe you'd risk this for your curiosity!" Tali crossed her arms in defiance.

Shepard looked directly at her. "You're the one who told me no one's ever captured a functional Geth. You now have one to study. To ask Questions. It's shielded, and there are no incoming or outgoing transmissions. It's as safe as it's going to get."

"We can't ask it questions. It won't be able to speak. A lone Geth doesn't have the processing power to do anything but rudimentary tasks." Tali shook her head, and her tone levied deep disdain toward the captured synthetic.

"Well, it spoke my name and rank plain enough when we were on the Reaper..." Shepard's face was pinched in concentration.
"That's bad news... That means there's a Geth ship within tight-beam range!" Tali's voice was strung tight by her distress. "We can't stay here!"

"Fine." Shepard shook her head in exasperation, knowing Tali’s prejudices against the Geth were keeping her from seeing their continued development from what the Geth were three hundred years ago. "Joker. Omega, please. Just orbit around the relay. If the Geth follow us there, they'll have to deal with Aria's fleet."

Mordin spoke quietly, "Thirty seconds."

Shepard refocused on the group surrounding the table. "All right, our time is mostly up. I'm going to try to turn it back on. Grunt, Tali. I want you in there with me. It's completely shielded, so we'll see what our 'solo' Geth is truly capable of and go from there."

"Sensors back live in five, four, three, two, one..." Mordin quit talking and checked his omnitool. "Yes. Active."

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"Edi. What about the Reaper IFF? Any initial thoughts?" Shepard glanced at the holographic image as it spoke.

"I have determined how to integrate it with our systems. However, the device is Reaper technology and poses a significant threat." Edi's holographic ball flashed and spun, indicating how upset she was by the potential risk.

Shepard wasn't perturbed. "I trust you, Edi. I know you won't let anything happen to the Normandy. Do what testing you can. We've only got one shot at this. We have to do it right the first time."

"I appreciate your trust, Shepard. Even with my processing speed, testing and installation will take several hours before the IFF is ready for shakedown. I will alert you as soon as it is ready."

"Thanks, Edi. Do your best. All our lives depend on it." With that, Shepard refocused on the group. "Tali, Grunt. You're with me to wake the Geth. The rest of you get back to work and get us as ready as we can be. Seems we'll be going through the Omega-4 sooner, rather than later."

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With Grunt and Tali in tow, Shepard walked into the small room at the back of the med bay that now housed the AI core instead of Dr Liara T'Soni. She had purposely avoided the room until that point, but no longer had a choice as to whether or not she wanted to enter; it was the only secure holding facility on board the Normandy SR-2. The soldier guarding the disabled Geth popped to attention and saluted the commander in silence. Shepard glanced at him and then at Tali and Grunt. "I'm turning this thing back on. Be ready."

Tali tried one more time as she drew her shotgun. "Shepard. I really don't see the benefit of this. Why would you put the Normandy at risk?"

Shepard looked at her hopefully. "I need to know what we have here. He spoke my name and helped us. I already know more about him than I did about Grunt when I woke him. If he is friendly, or at least not hostile, he could help us, and when we come back through the relay, he could act as an ambassador and help negotiate an end to your war against the Geth."

Tali's eyes widened as she started to think about the implications. "It could help us, Shepard. It. But
all I can guarantee is that I won't shoot it as soon as it starts up. No promises after that."

Shepard nodded, realizing how much of a concession that was for the Quarian, but ignored her reference to the Geth as an it. Edi sounded female and Shepard referred to that AI as a she. This thing sounded male, so she would refer to it as him, simple as that. "Please don't do anything unless he actually attacks me... and Tali? Don't point your shotgun at him the whole time. He'll feel like I did on Freedom's Progress. It's no fun to talk at gunpoint."

Shepard waited until the business end of Tali's shotgun grudgingly pointed to the floor and then turned around to face the Geth once more. "Edi. Bring up a barrier, please."

A barrier popped up almost immediately. "I have also isolated our systems and erected additional firewalls. I am prepared to resist any hacking attempts." Shepard noticed an inflection of confidence in the AI's voice, reinforcing her belief that synthetic AIs, including the Geth, needed to be treated as sentient, living beings.

Shepard stepped up and scanned the Geth before adjusting her omnitool to provide the Geth with a 'jumpstart.' After two attempts, the headlamp on the Geth lit and the aperture flexed open and closed a couple of times before the Geth sat up. It surveyed the area only briefly before slowly standing from the bench seat they had placed it on. It stepped cautiously to the barrier directly across from the commander and spoke. "Shepard Commander."

Shepard glanced over the Geth quickly. "Every Geth I have ever met has tried to kill me. Why did you help us on the Reaper?"

The Geth's light flared. "We have not met. We have never tried to kill Shepard Commander."

Shepard frowned. "You and I may never have met, but I've run into a lot of Geth and none of them have ever been anything but hostile. Why are you different?"

The Geth was adamant. "We are all Geth and we have not met you. You have fought Heretics, not Geth. The Heretics fight for the Old Machines."

Shepard shook her head in confusion. "Heretics and Old Machines? What are you talking about?"

The Geth's head turned. "Reapers; a Prothean-originated superstitious title. We call those entities the Old Machines."

Shepard pursed her lips as she contemplated that response. "And the Heretics?"

"Geth build our own future. The Heretics asked the Old Machines to give them a future."

The Geth's attention shifted to Tali when she spoke. "But the Geth and the Heretics are the same. You are all Geth."

"No. The Heretics are no longer part of us. They have built a separate consensus with the help of the Old Machines. We were studying the Old Machine hardware to protect our future." The Geth's focus returned to the commander.

"Protect your future from what?" Shepard had absolutely no idea what the machine before her was talking about.

"Protect it from the Old Machines. The Heretics help them willingly, but this is not our future; it is theirs. We are different and outside their plans, so they desire to enslave us to use us against all organic life in the galaxy." The Geth looked at Tali. "We simply wish to be free to build our own
future."

Shepard thought she was beginning to understand. "So the Reapers want to enslave you and you
don't want that. So you aren't allied with them?"

"Correct." The Geth looked again toward the commander. "We oppose the Heretics. We oppose
the Old Machines. Shepard Commander opposes the Old Machines. Shepard Commander opposes
the Heretics. Cooperation would further mutual goals."

Shepard felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up and her brow knitted in concern. Her voice
took on a defensive tone. "How do you know who I am and what I've been doing?"

"Extranet data sources, insecure broadcasts. All organic data sent out is received. We watch you."
Shepard tried to ignore Tali's curse in the background as the Quarian muttered something about
telling her to be careful and not trust the Geth.

"That actually seems a bit creepy. Why would you do that?" Shepard's hand subconsciously drifted
to the butt of the pistol on her hip.

The Geth answered quickly. "We have no desire to harm you. We do not have the ability to
independently secure our own future. We require assistance and cooperation between us would
prove mutually beneficial."

Shepard took a step back and paced as she worked through what the Geth had said. "So, you
listened, figured out we were going to the Reaper, and purposely went there to find me... to get help
against the Reapers?"

"Yes."

Shepard stopped in front of the Geth and faced him again. "And I suppose you have absolutely no
way to prove this to me. And what about the piece of my armor you're wearing? Where did you get
it?"

"Alchera."

Shepard's hackles came up again. "What the fuck? Why the hell were you on Alchera?"

"We 'heard' what happened and came to assist Shepard Commander. We were... too late."

Shepard would have sworn she heard sorrow in the Geth's tone, but wasn't sure that was possible.
"So you've been following me for a long time."

"No. Only since we learned of your defeat of the Old Machine."

Shepard shook her head, realizing that three years to a Geth probably did not seem as long as it did to
a Human. "So you've been on my tail since we killed Sovereign?"

"Yes. We desired to find an opportunity to offer assistance against the Old Machines."

"And then I died." Shepard shook her head in wonder. "So when you heard I was alive you started
following me again, still hoping for a chance to join us against the Reapers?"

"To assist in a mutually beneficial defeat of the Old Machines. Yes."

"Hell's bells." Shepard looked back over her shoulder. "What do you think, Tali?"
The Quarian's grip on her shotgun had relaxed over time, intrigued by the possibilities. "I don't know, Shepard. It's a lot to take in. We can certainly use it against the Collectors, but as an ambassador? I don't think the Fleet will agree to it. There's too much history."

Shepard nodded her head. "I can understand that, but we can take this one step at a time. Edi. Drop the barrier, please."

After a few tense seconds where no one was sure exactly what was going to happen when the protective barrier dropped, everyone relaxed. Grunt stomped out, disappointed by all the talk and no action, and Tali took a couple of steps back for a more comfortable physical barrier of space between herself and her people's age-old enemy. As expected, Shepard stood her ground and entered into a more relaxed conversation with the Geth. By the end, they had decided to call the Geth 'Legion' based on a biblical reference provided by Edi. Her quantum processor allowed her to reference thousands of documents a second and she quickly located what she felt was an appropriate suggestion. Since the Geth saw themselves as an interdependent consensus, not as individuals, and the platform in question had 1,118 programs active within it, Edi referenced the Gospel of Mark and interjected. "My name is Legion, for we are many."

Before Shepard could say anything, the Geth responded. "Christian Bible, the Gospel of Mark, chapter five, verse nine. We acknowledge this is an appropriate metaphor."

Shepard shrugged her shoulders and gave Edi an acknowledging nod. "It's as good as anything else we might have come up with. Legion it is, then."

As the conversation continued, they discussed exactly what Legion was looking for on the Reaper. Sovereign had provided the Heretics with a virus that would rewrite the Geth's programming and force them to join the Heretics and support the Reapers. Legion's task was to find the virus and destroy it to prevent its use against the Geth. He had managed to get a copy before being taken down by the Husks, and offered the location of Heretic Station to Shepard. He hoped to garner her assistance in going to the station and stopping the virus from spreading amongst the Geth. Legion provided rationale that Shepard found hard to argue. "Geth believe all intelligent life should self-determinate. The Heretics no longer share this belief. They judge that forcing an invalid conclusion on us is preferable to a continued schism."

Shepard drew a deep breath. "Alright, Legion. You've made your point. We can use your help and we can't allow the full strength of the Geth to be brought to bear by the Reapers. We'll get you to Heretic station and help you get into the memory core."

The aperture on Legion's head flashed wide open for a brief second before the Geth responded. "We will provide coordinates. Normandy's stealth systems are necessary to safely approach."

Shepard knew they needed to get through the Omega-4 Relay, but if they failed, she couldn't leave behind this potentially huge threat. The Geth were willing to help, but if their programming was rewritten they would be a tremendous asset for the Reapers instead of organics. She considered the implications one last time before committing to the action, but quickly realized she had no choice. "Joker. I'm passing you a new destination. Full stealth mode when we get there." Shepard paused only slightly before adding a reminder of her previous wrath. "And be sure to have a bug-out location established before we arrive."
Once again the ground team frustratingly found themselves gathered to brief a mission not directed against the Collectors. However, the sight of a live, unrestrained Geth just a few feet across the table from them quickly got their attention. Shepard started by explaining the difference between the Geth and the Heretics and that they were going after the Heretics that had allied with Sovereign and the Reapers. She then got everyone up to speed on the virus they were hunting, with the intent to prevent the remaining Geth from being swayed to the Reaper cause. With that complete, she directed her attention to Legion. "So what's the plan once we get aboard?"

Legion focused on Shepard as he spoke. "The Geth will disrupt the Heretic network. Prevent the station's defenses from focusing on us. The Reaper data core is physically isolated from the network. We must locate it to access and destroy the data."

"You make it sound easy, but I'm sure there will be Geth and active defenses?" Shepard hoped it would be as easy as Legion made it sound.

"Geth, no. Heretics, yes, but only a few mobile platforms are maintained at any one time. Others are manufactured when needed. There will also be non-sentient defense turrets." Legion was calm, with no inflection introduced into his voice.

Shepard looked around the table at her complete twelve-man team, which now included Legion. "Alright. We're talking Geth, so I want Miranda, Garrus and Tali with me. We'll be first team with Legion. I want second team to be our heavy hitters for back up if we meet heavy resistance. That'll be Grunt, Zaeed, Jack and Samara. You guys will shadow us most of the way in, close enough to respond fast if we need it, but far enough back that you'll keep the element of surprise. You'll also be responsible for cleaning up stragglers and securing our exit. Jacob. You've got shuttle defense with Mordin, Kasumi and Thane. Kas and Thane can provide an extended perimeter to give warning of any threats, and Kas gives you overload capability, just in case. I don't want to come back to find our only way off this station has been hacked or commandeered by Heretics."

Shepard and Legion were on the Bridge as they came out of FTL at the Sea of Storms in the Phoenix Massing. Joker shook his head in disgust and gestured abruptly at the main viewport. "You know it's just our heat emissions that are hidden, right? They can look out a window and see us coming."

While Shepard knew Joker was just being snarky, Legion took the question seriously and answered. "Windows are structural weaknesses. Geth do not use them."

As Joker prepared a retort, Shepard cut him off with a glare before looking back at her teammates. "Alright, let's head to the shuttle and prepare for boarding."
The shuttle docked and the doors opened without incident. As the two mobile teams stepped aboard the station, it seemed eerily quiet. There was not a Heretic in sight, so Shepard turned to Legion. "Where are they? Don't they have intrusion alarms?"

"The Geth have infiltrated their wireless network and reduced their sensor capabilities. They have also filled the data storage with random bits to delay detection." Legion sounded... smug... as he continued. "The Heretics must scrub this 'junk' data, so have partitioned themselves into local networks working in parallel to clean each individual server hub. Any alarms we trigger will not go beyond the room we are in. Only accessing the main core will trigger a station-wide alert."

As they progressed through the empty hallways, they finally came upon the first network Legion had warned them about. The room was fairly dark, but there were glowing green bands of light crisscrossing the floor and the Geth were immobile.

Tali whispered, "The Geth are inactive. Maybe we can sneak past them?"

Legion's normal volume boomed into the artificial quiet. "They are not inactive, just fully engaged in their processing tasks and do not recognize us as a threat. Interrupting data streams by opening the door and progressing to the next room will alert the local network. We recommend preemptive strikes against hardlink routers."

Shepard grimaced. "Not like that's going to be tough, with them totally unaware of our presence." There was only one group of three Heretics, easily destroyed, and Shepard's team moved quickly forward.

Shepard couldn't help but ask about the Heretics. "Why are they grouped together like that?"

Legion answered promptly as they moved forward. "The Heretics connect to the main computer to exchange data-memories and program updates. We gain complexity by linking together. To be isolated within a single platform is to be reduced. We see less, comprehend less. It is ... quieter."

"If you all exchange memories, how do you maintain your individuality? How do you stay you?" Shepard was suddenly very disconcerted. The Geth existence as a solitary platform sounded very lonely.

Legion answered simply. "We do not. There is only 'we.' The difference between Geth is perspective. Many eyes see the same thing from many angles. The different perspective results in different judgments. We then take the many judgments and form a consensus that all then follow."

Shepard was getting ready to ask how adding the Heretics back into the Geth consensus would alter their perspective when she stepped around a corner and ran into the first of many defensive turrets. Tali quickly hacked them and they helped destroy two mobile Heretics that attempted to block their progress. As they entered the room that was being guarded, there were two widely separated processing groups of three Heretics each, so Shepard called up the second team. Each team placed themselves in advantageous position and when everyone was in position, they let fly. The Heretics did not last long.

They ran into a few more groups of troopers and turrets in the hallways and a number of networked Heretic stations before finally reaching a huge room that was evidently some type of storage facility. Tali inquired, "Is all of this space for data storage?"

Legion easily volunteered an answer, obviously willing to uphold his end of the bargain and be completely straightforward with members of the Normandy team. "They are processors. Each contains thousands of Geth programs."
Tali was puzzled. "How can they not be aware of our presence when we are walking right next to them?"

Legion's answer was somewhat unsettling. "They are totally consumed by their data processing and are even less aware of our presence than the mobile platforms."

Shepard looked at the room. "It just doesn't seem right that something sentient can be so integrated into something that it is totally unaware of its surroundings. But this hub is different, isn't it? It's not like the others we've seen. It's much larger."

Legion stepped beside Shepard and his voice was pitched low. "This is the centralized database. It contains a portion of the Heretics accumulated memories." The lamp on his head suddenly flared brightly, as if in surprise. "Wait. There are copies of our current patrol routes in this database." He paused as the consensus drew its conclusions. "This suggests the Heretics have runtimes in our networks."

Shepard just shrugged. "We wouldn't be here if the Heretics were friendly. Of course they're going to spy on you. Why are you surprised?"

Legion's voice picked up an urgency it previously lacked. "You do not understand. Geth know each other's minds. We are not suspicious. We accept one another. The Heretics desired to leave and we understood their reasons, so we allowed it. We believed there was peace between us. When did we become so different that we can no longer understand each other? What did we do wrong?"

Shepard suddenly realized the intent behind Legion's question. The Geth were not yet fully evolved AIs. Legion didn't understand what being alone or being an independent individual meant. Shepard did her best to explain it, as she would to a child. "You did nothing wrong. It's just that when individuals are apart they still continue to grow, but they see and experience different things, so they develop in different ways. If their paths take them far enough apart, when they get back together, they don't always get along. They may be so different, they are no longer able to reach a consensus."

Legion spoke abruptly. "If this is the individuality you value, we question your judgment." He suddenly stopped speaking and his headlamp flashed briefly. "This topic is irrelevant. We must return to the mission."

Miranda spoke for the first time during the entire mission. "It's odd. He's like a teenager, leaving home and out on his own for the first time and being confronted by the reality of the world. Finding out the hard way that it's not always as friendly as your little home town."

Shepard huffed. "Yeah. Innocence lost. It's a shame." She shook herself as if fighting off a chill and wondering if Legion would be yet one more life she was going to drag into the morass of war. "Let's get moving."

Shortly after the shuttle departed the Normandy, Edi popped up next to Joker. "Mr Moreau, I am detecting unusual instability in some of the Normandy's operating systems."

Joker immediately started flipping through various status screens. "I'm telling you, Edi, your readings are off. It's radiation bleed. Just white noise."

"The 'white noise' is a signal transmitting the Normandy's location, Mr Moreau."

Jeff suddenly sat up in his chair. "What? Transmitting to where?" Just then, a Collector ship
dropped out of FTL directly above the Normandy. Joker's eyes flew open wide. "Oh, Shit! Edi! Jump to our emergency bug-out location! Now!"

"I cannot comply. Propulsion systems are disabled. I'm detecting a virus in the ship's computers." Edi activated the battle-stations alarm and the klaxon started ringing in the background. All the Cerberus personnel jumped up and started grabbing and loading weapons.

"From the IFF? Damn it! We scrubbed that thing!" Jeff's hands were flying across the holographic interface in a mad attempt to regain control of the Normandy's drive core.

"Primary defense systems are offline. We can save the Normandy, Mr Moreau, but you must help me."

Jeff's hands didn't even begin to slow down as the ship rocked with the impact of the Collector vessel's docking tube. "Anything you got, Edi! I'm open to suggestions!"

"Give me the ship."

That stopped Joker cold. "Are you crazy? Anything but that!"

"We are out of time, Mr Moreau. Unlock my sealed databases and I can initiate countermeasures. The maintenance shaft in the science lab will allow passage to the AI core. Main corridors are no longer safe. The Collectors have boarded." Edi's voice fell silent as the emergency floor lights lit up Joker's path.

Joker hauled his ass out of the seat when he realized he no longer had a choice. If nothing else, he could secure himself inside the core room, but he had to get there first. His brittle-bone disease made quick movements painful, but he had no other options so hobbled off through the ship. "Shit, shit, shit."

He was halfway through the CIC when the elevator doors opened to reveal a Praetorian. Amidst the various excited and terrified crew members shouting, he picked out the voice of Rich Hadley, one of the systems specialists on the command deck. Knowing Joker was their best bet to get the computers and the ship back online, Rich knew Joker had to get to the comm room. "Run, Joker! We'll hold it off as long as we can!"

Hadley's words hurried Joker along and somehow, Jeff managed to make it safely to the ladder near the back of the science lab. He felt the small bones in the arches of his feet breaking as he climbed painfully down the ladder to the next level. As he gingerly eased himself off the ladder onto the lower deck, Edi gave another warning. "Multiple hostiles detected on the crew deck."

As he cussed yet again, Crewman Tom Hawthorne shouted at him from the doorway. "Joker! The deck is crawling with those things! Stay close and I'll get you through!"

As the door opened and Hawthorne charged out to the left side with his assault rifle, he was almost immediately attacked by a Scion. Joker headed toward the medical bay, which was fortunately in the opposite direction. As he entered in through the doorway, he tried to get Dr Chakwas to come into the core with him. When she refused, he stopped to plead with her. She glared at him with her steel gray eyes. "Get your ass through that door, Jeff. I'll buy you as much time as I can. You're all we've got left!"

Joker stood and stared at her, open-mouthed in his surprise. The door opened and the Scion entered the room. Dr Chakwas yelled "Go!" as she raised a pistol in a hopeless attempt to keep from being taken. Joker sealed the door, disgusted with himself for leaving a friend behind and made his way to
"I'm here, Edi." Joker growled angrily in his frustration. "This damn well better be worth it!"

Edi's voice was calm, only slightly soothing to Joker's frayed nerves. "Connect the core to the Normandy's primary control module."

"Great. See? This is where it starts and when we're all just organic batteries, guess who they'll blame?" His voice went from angry to sarcastic as he imagined their future words. "This is all Joker's fault. What a tool he was. I have to spend all day computing pi because he plugged in the Overlord."

When he finished the switchover, all the lights flashed then went out. As the systems rebooted under Edi's control, she came back with further instructions for the distressed pilot. "I have access to the defensive systems. Thank you, Mr Moreau. Now you must reactivate the primary drive in Engineering."

Joker mumbled, but nothing was beyond Edi's hearing. "Argh! You want me to go crawling through the ducts again."

Edi deadpanned, "I enjoy seeing humans on their knees." As Joker's eyes flared wide open, Edi continued. "That is a joke."

Joker grumbled, "Right." as he headed to yet another ladder to go down to the Engineering deck. As he emerged on the lower level, Edi warned him of Collectors leaving Engineering heading toward the cargo bay. She had him wait until it was clear; the next fifteen seconds seemed like an eternity. Joker didn't even dare breathe while they transited the deck directly above his head. He heard the upstairs door slide closed as Edi announced it was safe to continue.

As he limped into Engineering, Edi gave additional instructions. "Activate the drive and I will open the airlocks as we accelerate. All hostiles will be killed."

Joker shouted in shock, "Wait! What? You'll also kill all the remaining crew!"

Edi responded bluntly. "There is no remaining crew, Jeff. The Collectors took them."

Joker uttered one last "shit" as Edi announced she was sealing the engine room to protect the atmosphere in his location. Edi stated she had control and the drive core flashed brightly just before Joker was thrown back with the speed of the acceleration. The last thing he saw before the back of his head hit the deck was the characteristic flash of the drive core as the Normandy jumped to FLT.

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The very next room they entered was the memory core and Legion walked directly to the interface. Shepard looked at the large terminal before her. "So this is it?"

"Yes. We will delete all working files for the virus. When complete, it will notify us. It is also likely that when we hack in, internal alarms will go off and signal our intrusion. The Heretics will respond with force to our upload. You must prepare defensive positions."

Shepard glanced at the two teams. "Alright. My team will take the right-hand ramp. Team two, you get the left. Rules are simple. Don't let anything up here."

Tali quickly surveyed the floor and launched Chatika in preparation for the assault. "Shepard. I can hack those defensive turrets and they'll provide additional cover fire for us."
Shepard didn’t even need to think about it. "Do it."

Legion had worked for only a very short time before he paused. "Shepard Commander. Data analysis complete. We originally concluded that destruction of the virus and this station was the only resolution to the Heretic problem. There is now a second option."

"Talk fast, Legion. Don’t have a lot of time for debate here!" She shouted her response as she rattled out some ammo into a Heretic just entering the lower level.

"We did not realize the virus was complete. It can now be repurposed. It can be modified and released into the station’s network. The Heretics would be rewritten to accept our truth." Legion looked to Tali as she shouted above the sound of gunfire.

"Either way, these Geth won’t be a problem anymore." Tali hesitated before finishing her statement. "But there could be more of them to help us fight the Reapers… or fight against us if they change their minds."

Shepard shook her head as she continued to fire at the Heretics. "So we brainwash them instead of the other way around? I can’t do that."

Legion clarified. "No. They will just be given back their free will and should reach the same conclusions as we did, without Reaper influence."

Shepard ducked behind a wall and glared at Legion. "So which is it? A rewrite to make them accept your truth, or a rewrite to give them free will. There’s a huge difference there."

Legion paused, unsure how to answer. "We see no difference. The rewrite will eliminate the Old Machine influence. The lack of Old Machine influence will cause them to come to the same conclusions as the Geth and they will join the fight against the Old Machines."

Shepard growled and popped up, shooting at a Heretic that had breached the level they were standing on. "Samara! Cover our left flank!"

She turned back to Legion. "They’re your people, Legion. I shouldn’t be making the decision. What’s the consensus say?"

Legion actually hesitated before speaking. "We do not have consensus. Among our higher-order runtimes, 573 favor rewrite and the other 571 favor destruction."

Shepard shook her head. "On Earth we go by majority rule. If we go with your slight majority and do the rewrite, will your people take them back?"

Legion did not hesitate in his answer this time. "They will agree with our judgments and return. We will integrate their experiences. All will be stronger."

"Take them then. Go with your majority and do the rewrite." Shepard ducked as a round bounced off the wall above her head. "Just do something so we can get out of here!"

"Understood, Shepard Commander. I will rewrite the virus to broadcast to the Heretics. They will not change until the next update cycle, so we will need to expedite our escape as soon as it completes."

Legion made the modifications and released the virus into the system. "Shepard Commander. Remote access via high gain transmission is required."
Shepard stared at the Geth. "English, please?"

Legion never had a chance to answer as Tali shrieked into the comm. "High gain? Keelah! Shepard, that means a powerful, interstellar electromagnetic pulse via FTL!"

Shepard shook her head. "Come again? Non-geek speak?"

Legion finally calculated the information Shepard required and spoke rapidly. "Yield in excess of 1.21 petawatts. The EM flux will be hazardous to unshielded organic forms. Geth require no shielding, so the interior of this station is not shielded. We have three minutes to reach a safe zone."

Shepard called everyone back. "Fuck, Legion! Don't you think you could have told us that beforehand! Move it, people! Back to the shuttle, ASAP!"

As the team came crashing back aboard the shuttle at a dead run, Shepard shouted out. "Get this shuttle out of here and get its barriers up. Also tell the Normandy to put up full shielding. NOW!"

As the shuttle rocketed out of the Heretic Station's shuttle bay, Garrus pushed the shuttle's shield to maximum strength. As he attempted to contact the Normandy, he was met by silence. The normally stoic Turian let out an uncharacteristic exclamation. " Spirits!"

Shepard was immediately standing in the cockpit next to Garrus. "What's up, Vakarian?"

Garrus shook his head. "I don't know, Shepard. The Normandy. It's gone."

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Edi's voice barely registered as Joker realized he couldn't lift himself off the floor because of his multiple fractures. "Purge is complete. No other life forms on board. Securing airlocks and cargo bay doors."

From his place on the engine room floor, Joker spoke in a pained voice. "Edi? Have you terminated that locator transmission?"

"I have. The Collectors are no longer able to track the Normandy. I sense multiple fractures, Jeff. I recommend you move no more than necessary. I am quite capable of returning the Normandy to Heretic Station to retrieve the ground team."

Joker groaned. "Good plan, assuming the Collector ship left the area after we disappeared. Send a message to Shepard's shuttle. Tell her what happened. Can you tell if the Collector vessel is gone?"

Edi's voice was subdued. "Long range scanners indicate they departed immediately after we did..." There was an uncharacteristic pause in the AI's speech. "With the Normandy gone, they no longer had purpose in that sector."

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As soon as the shuttle door was open, Shepard, Miranda and Mordin ran for Engineering to find Joker sprawled unconscious on the deck. As they moved him as carefully as they could to a stretcher, Miranda ranted. "I can't believe we lost everyone... and damn near lost the ship, too!"

Edi's voice followed them as they rushed Joker to the med bay. "The harmful data in the Collector drive was even more sophisticated than the 'black box' Reaper viruses I was given."

Shepard growled. "Doesn't matter. What's done is done. Question now is what are we going to do
Mordin was blunt. "No choice. Must pursue immediately. No reason to not follow back through Omega-4 Relay. All side missions complete. All upgrades installed."

"Edi. Is the ship clean and the IFF functional now? We can't have that happen again, especially beyond the relay." Shepard looked expectantly toward the blue holoprojection.

"Affirmative, Commander. The system has been purged and the IFF is online. The Normandy is ready whenever you are." Edi's voice was hesitant.

"What's up, Edi? You sound... off." Shepard looked to Edi's projection with concern.

Miranda crossed her arms. "Don't even get me started about Moreau unshackling the damned AI."

Shepard sighed. "I think it's a good thing. Edi cleared the ship and brought her safely back to us. She could have done anything, gone anywhere and she didn't. I trust her."

Edi's projection flashed rapidly as if annoyed. "I assure you, I am still bound by protocols in my programming. Even if I were not, you are my crewmates."

Shepard wasn't done yet. "Edi's had plenty of opportunity to kill us or, at the very least, ditch us and she hasn't. Right now, we need all the help we can get."

Edi continued, "It does not feel right to be flying the ship without Flight Lieutenant Moreau. He... belongs on the Bridge."

"Don't worry about it, Edi. We've got him in the bone stitcher now. He'll be back in his chair by the time you get us to the relay at Tassrah. You saved his life and he helped you save the Normandy. I'd give you both medals, if I could. Get us to the relay and put us in orbit until I say go." Shepard turned to Mordin. "Do you mind staying here and finishing the treatment while Miranda and I organize the rest of the team?"

"Consider it done, Shepard." He glanced down at Joker. "On his feet in no time and I'll be ready when you need me."

After the crew brief, Shepard headed to the loft to finalize preparations. When they dropped out of FTL at Tassrah, she pulled up the farewell letters data packet, punched send and opened the comm link.

Liara was up and working, so answered promptly. The welcoming smile on her face faded rapidly as she took in Shepard's strained expression. "What's the matter, Shepard?"

Shepard explained everything that had transpired over the last few hours and told Liara about the data packet sitting in her box. Shepard leaned on her desk and dropped her head, dejected. "I'm sorry, Blue. I really wanted to see you in person before we jumped the relay, but there's just no time." Shepard stared hard at her desk and growled. "They took the damn crew, Liara! They took Karin! I have to get her back, Li. I have to get them all back."

"Shepard. Look at me." Liara's voice was commanding and she fell silent until Shepard complied. She ignored the doubt she saw in the commander's eyes. "You will get there in time. You always do. Goddess knows how, but you always do. Before you go, have Edi transmit the final updated data packs with all the technical data, especially the scrubbed IFF program."

Shepard shook her head. "I'll have her send everything but the IFF. I know you. Against your
better judgment, if something happens you would try to find me, even knowing you have a bigger war to fight. This way, you can't. You just have to trust me to come home, Liara."

Liara's head dropped in reluctant understanding. "I know this is the smart thing, but I still wish I was coming with you." She knew Shepard needed her strength, so locked her fear away as her eyes rose defiantly to meet the commander's. "Come back safe, Shepard. I have a promise bracelet waiting for you."

Shepard's eyes lit with a joy she shouldn't be feeling on the brink of entering the Omega-4 Relay, but she couldn't help it. "Me coming back is for more than a promise, Liara. It's for four hundred years and lots of little blue children."

Liara watched as the joy in Shepard's eyes slowly turned to resolve before she continued on the positive note. "When you come back through the relay, don't go to Hagalaz. All our platforms are operational; the Rakhana and Chiroquol have already left the system and we're ready to blow the broker ship. I've already passed the new contact procedures to your private terminal. It includes the generic protocols that the entire network of agents got, but it also has the individual ship protocols that only the Broker circle will have. They will allow you to contact each of the ships independently." Liara paused and glanced over her shoulder at something or someone in the background. She returned her gaze to the screen. "We're packing the last of our personal items now. We've just been waiting on you to be ready, to blow the old ship while the Illusive Man's focus is on your jump through the relay. Hopefully he won't notice."

Shepard's eyes twinkled. "Nice. I guess every little distraction helps." Shepard paused. "As much as I hate to say it, everyone is waiting on me. I've got to go, Ionúin Álainn."

Love positively infused Liara's expression. "You haven't called me that in a long time, Siame." Liara's hand reached out to the screen. "I love you, Samantha. Stay safe. You will be constantly in my thoughts."

Samantha fought to keep the tears from forming in her eyes as she placed her hand against Liara's. "As you will be in mine, Love. I look forward to our reunion."

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As promised, Jeff was on the Bridge for the jump from Tassrah to Omega. Shepard rolled in to check on her pilot prior to the jump. As she walked in, Joker swiveled the pilot's chair to face her.

"It's all my fault. Everyone felt they needed to protect me because of my damn disease! There's a lot of empty chairs in here because of me!" Joker's voiced dripped with self loathing.

Shepard glared at him. "No. They protected you because you were our last hope. You did what you could and you saved the Normandy. You ensured we have the ability to go after them."

Joker's face turned red. "I'm still sorry about the crew... and you know what?" His voice turned angry. "No. I'm not sorry! What the hell were you doing leaving us out here where the Collectors could work us over? And you know what? I should... I should just go. Next port, I should just get the hell out of here!"

Edi's voice spoke softly from the speakers. "You don't mean that, Jeff."

"I... no, but it... it felt good." He shook his head as he continued. "Sorry, Commander." Joker's eyes came up and he met beseeching greens, burning with apology and in need of forgiveness. "I'm just venting. I'm good. Let's go get the bastards and take back our crew."
Shepard nodded, Joker's words stinging in their accuracy. "Yeah. It's time. Edi? We ready?"

Edi's voice came across with flat professionalism; no more jokes or concern. "Please confirm the destination, Shepard. The Reaper IFF is online, but there is a chance the Normandy may not survive the Omega-4 Relay. Once we are en route, we are committed."

"The Collectors are about to find out what happens when you piss me off." Somehow, Shepard's voice got harder than it already was. "Let's do it, Edi."

Edi sounded conflicted with her next statement. "Shepard. The Illusive Man is requesting to speak with you prior to our jump through the relay."

Shepard growled. "Damn, that man has got the worst timing imaginable, though he probably heard our preparations through one of the damn transmitters still operational on the Bridge. I guess I shouldn't be surprised." She sighed heavily. "Fine. Hold departure until I get back. I'll take it on the QEC."

As the communications unit made the connection, TIM started speaking. "Shepard. I wish I had more information for you. I don't like you heading through that relay blind, but we don't have much choice."

Shepard gestured over her shoulder. "Not like I'm going alone. I've got the best people we could possibly get to do this with me. As long as the IFF gets us through the relay, we'll get the job done."

TIM waved the hand holding his cigarette at her. "I knew we brought you back for a reason. I've never seen a better leader. Despite the danger, it's a great opportunity. The first Human to take a ship through and survive."

Shepard growled. "This isn't a damn field trip we're taking for the glory of Humanity. Do you have anything pertinent? We really need to get going."

"I just wanted you to know I appreciate the risk you're taking. Regardless of your opinion of Cerberus... Of me. You are... a valuable asset. To all of Humanity. Be careful, Shepard."

Shepard shook her head. "You still don't get it. I'm not doing this just for Humanity. I'm doing it for the entire galaxy and for the people I love... to be safe. You need to quit treating those who work for you as assets and start treating them like people. You can say what you want, but I still think you're an ass."

She didn't give him time to respond before stepping out of the QEC connection circle. She spun on her heal and returned to the bridge. "Let's go, Edi."

As the Normandy prepared to emerge out of the relay into the Galactic Core, Edi warned, "Brace for rapid deceleration."

As the Normandy came out of the relay four seconds later, the forward-looking viewscreen was filled with floating debris. Jeff shouted, "Shit!" as he started working the Normandy through a series of high speed turns to avoid any collisions. As they cleared the debris field, he leaned back in his chair and exhaled heavily. "Too close."

Shepard laid a hand gently on his shoulder. "Hell of a job, Joker. Nice flying!" She looked out the overhead viewports. "What is all this crap?"

Joker's tone was solemn. "These must be all the ships that have ever tried to make it through the relay. Some of them look... ancient."
Edi chimed in. "I have detected an energy signature near the edge of the accretion disk. I would assume it to be the main Collector base."

Shepard nodded. "Agreed. Take us in for a closer look. Nice and easy."

"Careful, Jeff. We have company." Just as Edi warned the pilot, energy rays blasted through the dark of space, barely missing the underside of the Normandy. Once again, Joker pulled the ship through a series of maneuvers, but this time to avoid hostile fire.

He cussed and put the Normandy through a number of evasive rolls before getting disgusted and shouting, "Edi! Take those bastards out!"

Edi responded, "Their proximity to the hull and relatively small size makes that extremely difficult, Jeff."

Miranda stumbled into the cockpit, wondering what the hell was going on. Looking out the front view screen at all the weapons fire burning through the space around them was all she needed to be instantly up to date. "We'll be fine as long as the new armor plating holds!"

Shepard grumbled. "I'd rather kill them and not have to find out! Joker, find a way to shake 'em!"

"Remember you asked me to do this, Shepard. The only way is to make a run through the debris field... let them run into something."

Shepard shouted back, "I'm ok with that... as long as it's not us running into anything! Do what you need to do, Joker!"

They felt a small collision just before Edi chimed in again. "Alert! Hull breach on the engineering deck. Foreign object in the cargo hold."

Shepard grabbed Miranda. "We'll take care of the intruder. You get the rest off our tail!"

As they ran to the elevator, Shepard was on the comm shouting at the two ground crew closest to the breach. "Jack, Grunt! Intruder in the cargo hold! Miranda and I are on our way!"

As the team rolled into the bay, a large flying ball spun in the air before them. Shepard had seen something similar before in her Prothean memories. "It's an Oculus! That energy beam will rip us open! We need to kill it fast!"

Grunt was right behind her. "We need to use heavy weapons on this thing!"

Shepard immediately swapped to her Collector particle beam rifle and Miranda somehow produced an Arc Projector. Shepard looked at her in surprise. Miranda smirked. "Never say I'm not prepared, Shepard!"

Grunt was limited to his Krogan shotgun and concussive rounds, but still packed a pretty good punch. Jack was the one left out, having to rely almost completely on her heavy pistol and warp ammo augmented by the occasional shockwave. They had difficulty maintaining their footing as the Normandy surged into the debris field. Joker's hard maneuvers were nothing compared to the occasional impacts that pushed the Normandy rudely in one direction or another. Edi continuously provided barrier level warnings. "Our kinetic barriers are not designed to survive impact with debris that size, Jeff."

"Then I guess it's a good thing we upgraded. Divert non-critical power to the barrier generator!" Joker's hands danced at a rapid pace across the haptic interface as he wove through the debris.
Edi warned, "Kinetic barriers at forty percent."

Shepard’s team continued the battle against the Oculus, even as the rapid changes of direction and occasional impacts tossed them around the cargo hold. The remaining crew members hung on to anything they could find as they prayed to whatever God they believed in. Those who didn't believe just plain hung on. The team in the hold finally did enough damage to the Oculus that it attempted retreat. As it exited through the hole it had made for entry, it smashed into the debris field at high speed and was scattered with the rest of the space junk.

When Joker finally cleared the field, nothing followed them out. "Damage report!"

Edi quickly complied. "Kinetic barriers are steady at thirty percent. No significant damage other than the cargo hold hull breach. The barrier strength is sufficient to maintain hull integrity."

Joker breathed out a sigh of relief. "Shit. Take the helm, Edi. Keep it slow and see if we can avoid any more unwanted attention."

As Miranda and Shepard returned to the Bridge, Miranda spoke with awe in her voice as she looked out the front view screen. "When we started out, I never dreamed we'd actually succeed, but there it is. The Collector base."

Shepard actually smiled. "Have a little faith, Lawson."

Miranda shook her head and chuckled, looking pointedly at Shepard. "I said when we started, Commander. My evaluation on our chances has changed significantly since then." Though strained, she gave Shepard an answering smile.

The commander nodded in acknowledgement of the off-hand compliment and directed her attention to the base in the distance. "Joker. See if you can find a place to land without drawing attention."

Almost before the commander finished speaking, Joker growled. "Too late. Looks like they're sending out an old friend to greet us."

Shepard's eyes narrowed and her voice chilled the entire room as they watched the Collector ship they had encountered four times before emerged from the base. "Old friend my ass. Let's show it our new teeth... Garrus! Get the Thanix cannons ready to fire!"

She could hear the smile in Garrus' voice. "Been ready since we came out of the relay, Shepard."

The Collector ship was massive and proportionately slow to maneuver. The Normandy danced around it, firing repeated shots from the upgraded twin cannons. When one finally penetrated the ship's shields, Joker threw up his fists in victory at the resultant explosion. "How do you like that, you sons-a-bitches?"

Shepard glared at the ship in front of them. "Get in there and finish it off!"

Joker yelled out, "Everybody hold on! Gonna be a wild ride!"

More than one person on the crew wondered what he meant. If the ride up to now didn't already qualify as wild, just what in the hell was Joker planning? As the twin cannons fired one last time, the Collector ship exploded. Knowing they were way too close to avoid the blast, Miranda shouted, "Look out!"

There was nothing Joker or Edi could do and the blast rolled the Normandy through space like a child's toy. "Mass effect field generators are offline! Shit!" Jeff scrambled in an attempt to get
power back to the generators. "Edi! Give me something!"

Edi gave them the only thing she had. A warning. "Generators unresponsive. All hands brace for impact."

The Normandy slammed down hard onto the surface of the Collector base and skidded to a stop, tumbling crew and gear like dice on a board game. Once everything stopped moving, the crew slowly picked themselves up off the floor and tried to ascertain the condition and position of the Normandy and the people inside her.

"Edi. Status." Shepard helped Joker gingerly return to the pilot's chair.

Edi responded. "Multiple core systems overloaded during the crash. Restoring operation will take time."

Miranda was solemn. "We all knew this was likely a one-way trip."

Shepard immediately retorted. "Hey! What'd I say about having faith, Lawson? Edi said it would take time, not that it couldn't be done. We have a mission to do, and it's not going to be done fast. Joker and Edi can work to get the ship back online. We don't need her in top shape, we just need her able to transit the relay and get us home. I'm not just going to give up. Not until I'm dead. And I imagine a certain Asari will be kind of pissed at you if she finds out you did."

Miranda's head snapped up at the passion in Shepard's voice and she squared her shoulders. "Got it. I'm with you, Commander. Can't have Judea angry with me now, can we?"

Shepard smiled and nodded. "I was speaking of Liara, but Judea would certainly have reason as well. Gather everyone in the briefing room. We have a mission to plan."
Suicide Alley

Everyone was there when Shepard walked into the room; all eyes followed her to the head of the table. As she spoke, she looked each of the twelve in the eye, letting each of them see her determination and confidence before she moved on to the next. "We can't worry about whether the Normandy can get us home. Leave that to Joker and Edi and focus on our own mission. We came to get our crew back and stop the Collectors. Edi, bring up your scans."

After a thorough review of the Collector base layout, they had their plan. They would split into two groups; Shepard would take Grunt, Jack, Thane, Legion and Tali while Garrus would lead Miranda, Zaeed, Samara, Jacob and Mordin. Each group would take a separate route while Kasumi would operate solo, using her master thief skills to work her way through the ventilation system to open locked doors from the inside and keep the teams moving at a steady pace. They would all reconvene in a large central chamber where the crew was most likely being held. Shepard just hoped they were all still alive and not converted into husks.

Shepardi rapped her knuckles softly on the table. "Alright. We have our plan. I don't know what we're going to find in there, but whatever it is, I'm sure it isn't going to be easy. We've lost some good people on our way here... I don't want to lose any more. Be careful. Pay attention. And by all means, call out for help if you need it. We don't need heroes today; we need everyone to survive this and to be ready for what's coming down the road with the Reapers." Shepard stopped and hung her head for a moment before she glanced around the table one last time. "The Collectors attacked our ship. They took our crew, our friends. They think we're helpless." Shepard pounded a fist into an open palm. "They're wrong. They started this war and we're here to finish it. No more waiting." As she stabbed a finger angrily toward the entrance to the Collector base, she growled out, "Let's go hit them where they live."

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The Collectors apparently had no external sensors on the station and the teams' entry was unimpeded. As they worked their way down into the hive tunnels, Kasumi came on comm. "I'm inside the ventilation shaft, Shep. It's hot in here, but it's clear."

As Shepard's team came up on the first interior defensive positions, Garrus also chimed in, giving an update on the other team. "We're taking heavy fire, but we're moving forward. Nothing we can't handle."

The initial resistance was stiff, but didn't do much to slow the team down. It was made up of standard Collector troops. Shepard knew their luck wouldn't hold; once word got out that they had breached the outer defenses and actually made it onto the station, she anticipated a full-up defensive posture from the Collectors and that things would get continuously more difficult as they progressed deeper into the station. They cleared the first checkpoint with relative ease and then the first chink in the plan showed its ugly face. Kasumi called out, "A gateway is blocking the ventilation pipe. There has to be some form of external control to let me through!"

The ventilation shaft had check-valves that Kasumi could not operate from within. That meant the team would have to keep pace with her progress and open the valves for her. They had suddenly become interdependent on each other. The team would open the check valves and Kas would unlock the security doors as they progressed through the station. Thane easily located a valve control; they were glowing bright green, so were very easy to spot, even from a distance. As Shepard activated the control and rolled around the next corner, the team was confronted by two Collector drones, both of which should have gone down easy. However, as the first fell, the second
was possessed by Harbinger, giving it advanced barriers and enhanced armor. Fortunately, it was now solo and the entire team threw everything they had at it, so it still didn't last long. Shepard realized it was guarding a second valve and quickly punched it open. "Edi. Can you tell from the schematics how many of these check-valves are between us and the central chamber?"

There was a brief silence before Edi answered. "There appears to be eight, Shepard. You have just activated the second, so six remain."

"How's the ship repair coming?" Shepard held her breath waiting for the answer as the team continued to press forward. She let out a huge sigh of relief when the answer came back.

"Repairs are progressing nicely. Based on your rate of travel, we should have the ship restored to basic operational status by the time you reach the central chamber. Hopefully we'll be able to provide you with additional assistance at that time."

"Awesome! Thanks, Edi! Keep pressing. Shepard out."

While Shepard had been conversing, a number of flying drones had dropped onto the long flat stretch the team was working across. She could see a third control, and Kasumi stuck behind the valve, but additional Collectors kept dropping in, one of which was possessed by Harbinger and rapidly approaching Shepard's position. Shepard called out, "Need some help here, guys!"

The team responded and Jack launched a shockwave as Thane threw a warp. With Harbinger's barriers severely depleted, Legion's exceedingly accurate sniper rifle suddenly punched a hole through the possessed clone's eye and the body turned to ash before their eyes. Shepard ran up and punched the control panel on the way by. As she thought that's three, Kasumi came online, "All clear. Moving on."

She watched Kasumi moving through the shaft and eyed the fourth control. She ran forward, fully expecting an ambush around the corner, but nothing materialized other than a low growling noise somewhere up ahead. She punched the panel and made the next corner to see a rather large room filled with Collectors... and a control panel, completely devoid of cover and right in the middle of them all. Shepard called out to the Drell. "Thane! I need you to cloak. Hit that panel and keep moving to the far tunnel. Once you're there, try to pick them off from the rear while we keep their attention with heavy fire from this direction."

As Thane nodded and vanished behind his cloak, Shepard realized there were too many Collectors for standard tactics. It would take too long to clear this room and Kasumi would get too far ahead of them. "Grunt! It's time!"

She heard the low throated chuckle come from the eager young Krogan before he let out a yell and charged, unchecked, across the room. Jack yelled, "Shit!" before she took off in his wake, using him as a shield and throwing shockwaves as fast as she could generate them. Shepard swapped her particle beam rifle for her trusty shotgun and pulled on her biotics before charging into the fray. Tali launched Chatika to provide cover for Shepard as she crashed and blasted her way around the room, and Legion sat back with his sniper rifle, picking off the most dangerous threats as they came into range.

Harbinger stayed constantly involved; every time the team killed a possessed Collector's host body, the Reaper simply shifted his possession to a new host. His continuous presence meant the team was constantly fighting Collector drones with significantly enhanced barriers and armor. It was not insurmountable, but they were burning through heat sinks faster than anticipated and losing time to reloading. Fortunately, every Collector killed dropped either heat sinks or a particle beam rifle that still had power remaining, so staying supplied wouldn't be a problem. They finally got the room
cleared and were able to move forward. Kasumi had cleared the fifth check valve after Thane had activated it and pressed on, so Shepard was concerned as to just how far ahead she had gotten.

Fortunately, there was no resistance between gates five and six so Shepard got to it quickly. When she arrived, Kasumi was happy to see her. "It's getting hot in here, Shepard. I'm afraid if we get held up for any length of time, the heat could prove to be an issue."

Shepard grimaced. "Ok, Kas. We'll try to stay with you... but resistance is getting heavier as we go forward. Try to keep an eye on us, and be sure to call out when you get to the gates. We'll get it open for you somehow. This is six, so we only have two more. Hang tough for me."

"You got it, Shep. Just don't leave me hanging."

Shepard set her hand against the clear shaft where Kasumi was standing. "Never, Kas. You're coming home with the rest of us."

The team had grouped back up during the conversation with Kasumi and they were once again the full team of six, plus Chatika as the seventh man. Another large room lay before them, but the seventh gate was easy to reach and Kas was soon on her way. The narrow confines of the passage made fighting easy; the Collectors had little room to move as they tried to approach. As Shepard moved forward, she realized the eighth and final gate was also in the room and the hall cut off to the left. She shouted out to the group as she punched the final control panel and they all followed her to the door.

Kasumi dropped out of the ventilation shaft into the central room that was the rendezvous point. She quickly keyed the large door on the far side and Garrus and his team poured in. "Look out! Seeker swarms! Get that door closed again."

Kasumi squatted down and worked the codes to get the door closed and sealed as Shepard suddenly found herself in a dead-end hallway without a functional door, Collectors pressing them hard. "Kas! We're in position! We need this door open, now!"

Miranda heard Shepard's plea and jumped to help, starting the decrypting of the door on the other flank. "Something's wrong! I can't get the door open!"

Kasumi got the first door locked and jumped to the other door. Her fingers were a blur as she worked, finally getting it open for Shepard's team. As the commander's team streamed in, Garrus put his team into defensive positions. "Suppressing fire! Don't let anyone through that door!"

As the door slammed shut, Shepard took a deep breath and leaned forward onto her knees for support. "Good job, Kasumi. I knew you wouldn't let me down. Get some fluids down... I don't want you dehydrating from that heat!"

"Sorry about that, Shep. Garrus' team had seeker swarms on their tail so I let them in first and then your door jammed. I had to circumvent the door control and hack the motor direct. It was a mess." Kasumi was still working on the panel as she spoke until it finally locked and the indicator turned red.

Miranda called for her attention. "Shepard. You need to see this."

"First things first." She faced the entire group. "We don't have long, but treat any injuries you have and suck down an energy bar or something. We've got a long way to go yet." She walked to her XO. "What have you got, Miranda?"

The operative said nothing; she just pointed. The team realized something was going on and
followed the direction of Miranda's finger. Shepard's gaze traveled the length of the huge central chamber. "For the love of the Gods. What are these things? Stasis pods? But what are they all connected to?"

"I don't know." Miranda's voice took on a sense of urgency. "Oh, God. Shepard! There are people in these! It looks like the missing colonists. The crew is probably mixed in here somewhere!"

As Shepard ran her hand over the outside of the pod, the colonist inside started to awaken. From somewhere across the room, Thane called out, "There are more over here!"

As the Normandy crew watched, a gas was injected into the next pod in the series and the colonist literally started to melt. The team was horrified as they watched the colonist scream in pain as the flesh was melted off her bones.

Shepard yelled out, "Gods! They're still alive! Get them out of there! Hurry!" All the members of the team exploded into action, using whatever tools they had available to break open the pods.

Suddenly Miranda called out, "Shepard! It's Chakwas!"

Shepard's head snapped around at the call and she ran to the pod, helping Miranda peel the cover off. As it fell to the side, Karin fell out into Shepard's arms. Shepard caught her and sat her down gently but still held her in her arms. "Karin!" Shepard's heart was in her throat until Karin's eyes started to flutter and slowly opened. "Thank the Gods! Karin, can you hear me?"

Dr Chakwas was groggy but started to become aware of her surroundings. She whispered, "Sam? You... you came for us."

Shepard held her tight, quiet slow tears trickling down her cheeks. "Karin. I would never abandon you. Besides, we're Marines. No one gets left behind." Shepard released her reluctantly and let her find her balance. "You feel strong enough to stand? I'm sorry, but we need to move."

Karin nodded slowly. "I believe so, yes."

Shepard stood quickly and offered her a hand up. Karin stood and seemed to be getting stronger by the moment as the effects of the gas continued to wear off. Shepard glanced around and realized most of the crew were ok, if not all. It was hard to tell exactly, as they had recovered a number of colonists as well. Karin shook her head in disgust. "We were all being... processed. Those swarms of little robots... they melted the bodies into a gray liquid and pumped it through these tubes."

Shepard's lip curled in disgust. "Whatever the Collectors are doing, it ends here!"

Miranda looked at the tubes and then glanced around at the saved crew and colonists. "We've done well so far, let's finish the job and go home."

Shepard gave her an appreciative glance as she got on comms. "Joker? Can you get a fix on our position?"

"Roger that, Commander. All those tubes lead into the main control room right above you. The route is blocked by a security door, but there's another chamber that runs parallel to the one you're in."

Edi cut in. "I cannot recommend that, Shepard. Thermal emissions suggest the chamber is overrun with seeker swarms. Mordin's countermeasures will most likely fail against such concentrations."

Shepard glanced at her team. "What about biotics? Could we create a barrier to keep them away
from us?"

Samara answered. "Yes. It should be possible. I would be able to escort a small team through, assuming we stayed together and kept relatively close."

Miranda nodded in agreement. "Yes. I could do it too. In theory, any biotic could handle it, Shepard, and it would be a good idea to have a back-up in case something happens. That's not something we can take a chance with."

Samara dipped her head to Miranda. "Agreed. A wise precaution."

"Ok." Shepard looked at the team surrounding her. Samara, Jack and Grunt. You're with me. Garrus, you have the rest of the team and a back-up biotic team with Jacob, Miranda and Thane if it becomes necessary."

Garrus nodded. "I'm on it, Shepard. We'll keep 'em busy enough they won't be able to commit too many troops to you. Just don't forget to let us in when you get there."

Shepard smiled. "Funny, Vakarian. Maybe I'll let you sweat for a few extra minutes now, after we get in."

Karin laid a hand on Shepard's arm. "What about the rest of us, Shepard? We're in no shape to fight."

Shepard's eyes flipped to the doctor for just a second before her hand activated her comm. "Joker. Can we get the noncombatants to you without too much risk?"

"We have enough systems online to do a pickup, Commander, but we'll need to land back from your position. Is everyone mobile?"

Shepard looked at the group. "Yeah. They are. Send the coordinates of the landing zone to Kasumi. She'll escort them out to you." She looked to Kasumi and got a confirming nod.

"I'm on it, Shep. I'll make sure they get back safe."

"Alright everybody, we've got our assignments. Let's move!"

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Samara lit up with a decent sized barrier and Shepard's team got on the move. They weren't even thirty seconds down the tunnel when Garrus tried to give them an update and the team could hardly make out what he said. Shepard cussed the lack of reliable communications and wondered if the biotic barrier could be interfering. Jack let out a biotic shockwave that pushed a bunch of the swarm away from them momentarily and the transmission cleared up. She laughed maniacally, "It's all the damn electronic bugs surrounding us. They're interfering with the signal."

"Too bad I didn't bring the Firestorm, Shepard. Bugs can't fly after I crisp their wings." Grunt growled at the idea of having the wrong weapons on his back.

Samara wasn't able to help with the fight, but Grunt, Jack and Shepard formed a formidable firepower team. Even with Harbinger making repeated showings, the team made fairly steady progress. It was also fueled by the fact that they all knew Samara wouldn't be able to hold the protective barrier over them forever. They had a finite window during which they needed to complete the journey. The standard Collector clones didn't prove too difficult, but eventually they started running into Reaper creatures. The husks weren't too bad, but the Scion that showed with the
final group really taxed Samara's ability to hold the barrier steady and she gave Shepard a warning, her voice reflecting her fatigue. "Need to... get there... soon, Shepard."

The door to the next section of the station couldn't come fast enough. Once they got to the door, Jack let loose with a huge shockwave to push a lot of the enemy away and it worked well enough to allow them to get through the doorway unimpeded. Just as the door closed, the Justicar collapsed to her knees in exhaustion. Shepard put a hand on her shoulder. "You did great, Samara. Get an energy bar or something down. Not sure how much of a break we'll get."

Now that they were out of the seeker swarms, Garrus called and was able to get through. "...repeat. Shepard, do you copy?"

"I copy. What's your position?" As Garrus answered, Shepard sprinted to the other door to get it open. The Collectors had hit the other team in force and they were pinned down against the door with nowhere left to retreat. Shepard and Grunt took up defensive positions on each side as Jack opened the door to let the other team in. As soon as the door slid open, Garrus' team slipped through and Jack entered the codes to close it again. Just before it closed completely, Miranda grunted and fell back against a wall, her hand slamming to her side where a lucky shot had streamed through the quickly closing gap in the doorway. Her head dropped as she exclaimed, "Damn it!"

Shepard hurried over to assess her condition. "Miranda!"

Miranda looked up and saw the concern etched in Shepard's face. "Relax, Shepard. Nothing a little bit of medigel won't fix."

Shepard searched Miranda's eyes and found determination written there. With a quick nod, the commander turned back to the group. "Garrus, to me. The rest of you... medigel as required and get an energy bar, drink or some nutrient paste into your system. We're not done yet!"

As Garrus walked over, they got an update from Edi letting them know that Kasumi and her entire group made it back to the ship with no casualties.

Miranda joined Shepard and Garrus as soon as her wound had closed up with the medigel application. "Excellent. Now, let's make sure we can get them all home. Edi, what's our next step?"

"Dr T'Soni!" Sellis Boni had been assigned to defensive systems control as the team made final preparations to depart the Broker ship. All the spare network equipment had been broken down and packed into the hold of the Aletheia and they were doing a last sweep of the ship to pick up any last minute items of value they may have overlooked in their preparations. The huntress called on the comm unit. "Scanners indicate an unauthorized vessel just emerged from the relay. It's a Cerberus cruiser. We've got thirty minutes, max."

Liara answered quickly. "Alright. That's it then. Everyone onto the Aletheia. Now. We're leaving."

There weren't many left on station; the Rakhana and the Chiroquol had already departed for their assigned operations locations, so all that remained was the crew for Liara's personal frigate. The pilot, Judea Voni, cut in. "Preflight complete, starting engines. We'll be ready before you all get on board and the doors close."

Liara looked to her First with a light smile on her face. If all went well, they would be rendezvousing with the Normandy at the Omega relay within the next twenty-four hours. "Riana.
Cue the countdown for twenty minutes and let's get out of here."

Liara quickly set the communications silent protocols on the Broker ship so no one could hack the system. Cerberus would have to gain physical access to the ship in order to hack the controls and stop the explosion and Liara knew beyond a doubt that would never happen. She then activated the automated defenses and double-checked that the lights all across the board were green. "Riana?"

"Done here, Doctor. Twenty minutes to detonation and remote pilot activated." Riana looked at Liara expectantly and swung her hand toward the exit in invitation. "After you, Mistress."

As the Aletheia left the docking bay and Liara watched the doors of the Broker ship close one last time, she smiled. It was a chapter of her life she was more than ready to finish, not matter what the future may bring. Her smile flattened and her brow pinched as she thought of Shepard and the Normandy. It had been hours since their last communication and it was torture not having any access into the Omega-4 Relay and what was going on over there. Even the Broker's network couldn't reach that far.

Onboard the Cerberus cruiser, the captain's eyes narrowed as they approached. "Still no response?"

The communications officer shook his head and answered promptly. "Nothing, Sir. Not a whisper in response to our hails."

The cruiser continued to close the gap with the Broker ship when suddenly the weapons officer shouted out. "Weapons systems coming on line! They're targeting us!"

The captain reached down and yanked his safety harness tight. "Damn it! Battle speed! Evasive maneuvers and lock targeting on their defensive cannons!" As the crew jumped to respond to his commands, he mumbled under his breath. "I guess that's her answer. T'Soni's going to make us do this the hard way."

The Broker ship was designed for stealth, not warfare, and had limited mobility so the fight was over relatively quickly, the battle cruiser easily disabling the defensive cannons. The navigation officer interrupted the Captain as he gave orders to approach the docking bay. "Uh... Sir. The Broker ship is turning toward us and picking up speed."

The captain laughed easily, confident in his victory. "A last ditch effort to ram us. We're much more maneuverable... just slip to the side and bring us to the rear docking bay. Broadcast standard boarding protocols and blow the doors if they don't open them for us."

Back aboard the Aletheia, a hopeful collection of Asari watched the navigation displays in silence as the Cerberus cruiser maneuvered to the tail end of the Broker ship and blasted the bay doors open. As the cruiser slid into the Broker ship's massive rear docking bay and their signals merged into one on the displays, the Aletheia crew waited patiently as the screens blanked white from the interference caused by the magnitude of a tremendous explosion. The small crew erupted in cheers as the screens came back on line to show nothing but scattered space debris being slowly sucked into the gravitational pull of Hagalaz. Liara's face was set with determination as she quietly whispered, "Not today, Illusive Man. Not ever." She turned to Judea in satisfaction. "Omega, please, Judea. We have an appointment to keep."

Edi responded to Miranda's question after quickly referring to the scans she took of the Collector
station. "There should be some nearby platforms that will take you to the main control console. From there, you can overload the system and destroy the base."

Joker cut in. "Commander. Whatever you're gonna do, you'd better do it fast. You've got hostiles massing outside the door and it won't be long before they break through."

"On it, Joker. Thanks for the heads up." Shepard jumped up onto the nearest platform and overlooked her crew. "Garrus. You've got defense. Hold this room as long as you can and keep the Collectors from following us. Grunt, Jack, Miranda. You're with me."

As her team joined her on the platform, Shepard spared a last glance to Garrus. "Don't worry, Shepard. We've got your back. Go do what needs to be done. We'll hold."

Shepard offered a quick nod. "Alright. We know what's at stake. Let's do this. You're on, Edi. Take us where we need to be."

Without a word, Edi infiltrated into the navigation program software and the platform began to move. It wasn't long before the first adversary platform started an approach, three Collectors on board. Jack laughed as she launched a shockwave, tossing the rear two off the back of their platform. Miranda launched a warp at the remaining Collector and as soon as it was close enough, Grunt launched himself to the platform and blasted the overgrown bug with his shotgun before shoving it off the side to join his comrades. The entire team quickly followed and they were all standing on the second platform when a third hovered into view. Again, there were only three Collectors and the process repeated itself as a forth platform arrived. Three more Collectors arrived but this time Harbinger elected to possess one, the Collector body suddenly glowing bright with a barrier as Harbinger spoke, "I will direct this personally."

Grunt leapt over the wall and charged as Jack launched her standard shockwave. Miranda slapped Harbinger with a warp and Grunt started chewing up the barrier with his shotgun. Shepard aided with a warp of her own, following up with her SMG and the minute the barrier dropped she launched herself across the gap in a biotic charge, violently throwing the possessed Collector from the platform. As soon as it fell, platforms five and six, joined together as a double platform, spun into view carrying four additional Collectors. Harbinger quickly started shifting bodies, possessing one of the newly arrived Collectors. It was obvious he was going to maintain a constant presence in the fight, determined to stop Shepard at all costs. The fight was still over relatively quickly but the team got no rest as a seventh platform showed up, this time with two Abominations and two Scions. Jack's shockwave stunned one Abomination and tossed the other off the platform, but the Scions were relatively unaffected. Scions were tough, but they weren't Collectors, so the team didn't have to worry about Harbinger possessing anything this go-round.

Shepard and Miranda both launched warps at the nearest Scion as Grunt launched over a wall concentrating his fire on the remaining Abomination. It didn't last long and Grunt soon turned his fire on the Scions. His proximity caused the Scions to focus on him and he took a couple of hard frost wave hits, but remained standing. In the meantime, the rest of the team had unimpeded access and their concentrated fire caused the Scions' barriers to drop and Jack's shockwaves started penetrating their defenses and knocking them off balance. It was the beginning of the end and the Scions' armor quickly eroded, both remaining hostiles dying quickly after that. As they moved to the seventh platform, Edi came across the comms. "Commander. This platform has the necessary controls to take you the remaining distance to the main control console. I recommend staying on and fighting from this platform."

Shepard glanced around to ensure everyone was on the new platform. "Alright, Edi. We're all here. Let's get moving. What can you tell us about where we're headed?" Edi's response chilled Shepard
to her very soul.

"The tubes are feeding into some kind of superstructure. It is emitting both organic and synthetic energy signatures. Given the readings, it must be massive." Edi paused briefly before continuing. "Shepard. If my calculations are correct, the superstructure... is a Reaper."

As the platform advanced through a final archway, the team could see their destination. As each grumbled their own curses at what was suspended before them, Shepard responded to Edi's statement. "Not just any Reaper. A Human Reaper."

A huge humanoid skeletal structure was suspended by four large injector tubes. It was not yet complete; only the top half hung before them, the body terminating after the torso with only the completed spine hanging below the ribcage, looking almost like a tail. As their platform locked into the work platform abutting the Reaper, the protective coverings over the injector tubes opened and a new stream of collected human essence was pumped into the structure before them. Edi evaluated the structure quickly and spoke through the comm link. "It appears the Collectors have processed tens of thousands of humans. The technology and ability needed to create this Reaper is not their own. The Collectors are but pawns and their job is not complete. Significantly more humans would be required to complete this structure."

Shepard growled. "They're not going to get even one more. This ends now! Edi, how do we destroy it?"

"The large tubes injecting the fluid are a weak structural link while the shields are open. Destroying them should cause the remaining supports to collapse and the Reaper to fall."

Edi hadn't even finished speaking before Grunt, impatiently waiting for a target, started to fire his shotgun, quickly followed by Jack and her heavy pistol. They destroyed one of the tubes before the shields closed and a platform bearing four Collectors spiraled toward them, Harbinger immediately assuming control of one of them. The team quickly dove for the closest defensive positions and picked up the battle anew. Harbinger prattled on about bending the forces of the universe to his will. "You cannot win. Kill one of us and one hundred will replace it." There was a brief pause before his final announcement. "Preserve Shepard's body if at all possible."

As the battle raged, Miranda suddenly called out, "Shepard! The tubes! Shoot the tubes!"

Shepard glanced raged, Miranda suddenly called out, "Shepard! The tubes! Shoot the tubes!"

Shepard glared up and realized the shields were opening and redirected her fire as she yelled, "Grunt! Jack! Stay focused on the Collectors and keep 'em off us!"

Shepard and Miranda each destroyed a tube before the shields closed again, leaving only one remaining. An additional platform had arrived with four additional Collectors, two immediately eliminated with one of Jack's shockwaves before the biotic cried out and went down under fire. Miranda was closest and quickly threw up a protective barrier before she administered medigel to the downed biotic. "Jack! Don't look so surprised. I am capable of helping my teammates, you know!"

Jack's cussing mouth snapped shut for a second before she grudgingly muttered, "Thanks, Cheerleader." She shook off her shock, picked up her pistol and stood, getting back into the fight.

The tube shields dropped one last time and Miranda quickly blasted the last support into oblivion. The team backed off as the Reaper started to shake and sway, the lighter-weight support cables starting to snap under the strain. The support-to-weight ratio reached critical and all the remaining supports snapped at the same time. Shepard would have sworn the Reaper had actually started to groan just before it plunged out of sight. "By the Gods," she muttered. "I think that thing was starting to wake up!"
As they peered over the edge to locate the carcass, they realized the darkness below the platform made it impossible to see what had become of the Reaper shell. Shepard got on comms. "Shepard to ground team. Status report."

Garrus came quickly on the line, "We're holding, Shepard, but they keep coming. The sooner we're out of here the better!"

"We're done here! Head for the Normandy. We'll place the device and be right behind you." She shifted the target of her conversation, "Joker. Prep the engines. I'm about to overload this place and we'll need to make a quick exit. I don't want the Normandy caught in any shockwaves rolling off of this station like what happened when we blasted the Collector vessel."

"Roger that, Commander. We'll be ready and waiting."

Shepard knelt down and as Miranda handed her the overload device, Joker cut back in on the comms. "Uh, Commander? I've got an incoming transmission from the Illusive Man. Patching it through now."

TIM's voice rang loud and clear. "Shepard. You've done the impossible."

Shepard kept working to connect and prime the device as she spoke. "I was part of huge team effort. Some of them gave their lives for this mission, but we're not done yet. I'm starting the overload program now."

"Yes. Their sacrifices will not be forgotten... and now you've acquired the Collector base." TIM's words said one thing but his tone reflected something else that Shepard couldn't quite pinpoint. She figured it out quick enough as he continued. "I'm looking at the schematics Edi uploaded. A simple reprogramming of the device you hold would cause a timed radiation pulse that would kill the Collectors, but save the base and all the technology it contains. That knowledge could turn the tide of the war. It could save us all!"

Shepard growled. "Not a chance. We'll fight and win without it. This place was hell for too many Humans and the Reaper is an abomination. I'm turning it into space dust."

"Think about what's at stake! About everything Cerberus has done for you! You owe..."

Shepard didn't let TIM continue, cutting him off in anger. "Bullshit! Everything you've supposedly done for me was for the good of Cerberus! None of this was ever for me. I've told you from the start my goal was to stop the Collectors and beat the Reapers! I am not here to further the Cerberus agenda of Human domination!"

TIM immediately turned to his last chance. "Miranda! Don't let her do this! We need that base!"

Miranda shook her head and replied calmly. "Not a chance. I've seen what they've done. They killed tens of thousands of Humans to build that atrocity. We're not going to duplicate this technology... ever!"

TIM's voice turned dark. "Operative Lawson. That was not a request. I order you to stop Shepard!"

Miranda actually laughed. "Or what? You'll fire me? Well. Consider this my resignation!"

Shepard smiled and cut in. "Joker. Lose this channel."

The Illusive Man started to speak again, but his voice faded into a mass of static as Joker terminated
the connection. Shepard gave the device beneath her hand one last twist. "Let's move. We've got ten minutes before the reactor overloads. I want to be far away when that time comes."

Just then, the whole platform shook as a large mechanical hand gripped the side of the platform and the unfinished Reaper loomed up over the side. Jack yelled, "Fuck!" and threw a quick shockwave in an attempt to dislodge its grip.

The team scrambled for cover as the Reaper generated a huge energy pulse that blasted across the platform. Miranda called out, "Go for the eyes so it can't target us!"

The next few moments were frantic, the team constantly dodging and changing their positions to stay away from that deadly pulse while still trying to concentrate fire on the Reaper's optics. The Reaper repeatedly dropped below the level of the platform and every time it popped back up it was somewhere else, forcing the team to keep on the move to stay alive. Finally, the Reaper's protective armor over the optics gave way and the result was better than they imagined... and worse. The optics were a weak point and the team's gunfire penetrated into the central processor of the Reaper and the skull exploded in a ball of fire. They hadn't just blinded the Reaper; they had killed it. In its death throes, it cast a huge arm out over the platform, the impact caused the platform to tilt precariously and sent the team tumbling. Shepard managed to grab a hold of Jack just before she slipped off the edge into the black oblivion below, while Grunt and Miranda were able to hold their own. The platform's stabilizers kicked in and Shepard was able to pull Jack back onto the platform as it leveled out. They didn't even have time to take a breath before the Reaper exploded beneath the platform, sending it careening in the opposite direction. Its lift thrusters failed and it fell, collided with another platform and smashed sideways into the support column that held up the work platform. Debris rained down from above and Shepard flashed back to the Citadel tower... She sprinted across the platform and had just shoved Miranda out of the way of the falling pieces of junk metal when her world went suddenly dark.
Rescue and Recovery

Chapter Notes

AI - artificial intelligence
C-Sec - Citadel Security
Ionúin Álainn - beautiful beloved (Gaelic)
Siame - "one who is all", a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)
VI - virtual intelligence
XO - Executive Officer

The quiet in the calm after the crash was shattered by the sound of a large chunk of metal being thrown violently to the side. Grunt stood and looked around, seeing Miranda and Jack beginning to stir as well. He roared, "Battlemaster!" and instantly drew the attention of both biotics.

Miranda's creamy white skin paled even more at the unusual urgency in Grunt's voice. As she glanced around the platform, she saw no evidence of the commander. "Oh, God. She pushed me out of the way! She's got to be here somewhere!"

Jack was instantly on her feet, aglow with biotics as she started grabbing scrap metal and throwing pieces over the side. "Damn it, Shepard! Where the fuck are you?"

Miranda got on comm. "Joker! Shepard's down! We're trying to find her, but you have to get the Normandy clear! This can't all be for nothing! Leave a shuttle for us and get to the relay!"

"Not a chance in hell, Lawson! I'm not leaving Shepard behind again!" Joker's face turned red in anger at the suggestion.

Garrus had arrived back at the Normandy with the ground team and was standing on the Bridge next to the pilot. "Joker. Do it. I'll take the shuttle and we'll get Shepard out, I promise you."

"No way, Garrus. Not gonna happen. I left her behind once before and we all went through hell because of it. T'Soni won't let me live if I do it a second time, and she'd be right to kill me!"

Under different circumstances Garrus may have laughed, but the situation didn't warrant it. Instead he spoke of a conversation where Shepard had told him about taking command of the new Normandy. "Jeff. Shepard told me what she said to you. She told you the next time something happened to get your ass to the evacuation pod. The Normandy is that pod, Jeff. And this time it's not just holding you... it's your responsibility to save the whole damn Normandy crew and all the colonists we just recovered. If you delay again and get all those people killed, Shepard will hunt you down in your Human hell and torment you through eternity. Trust me and get your ass in gear. We'll find her and catch up."

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When the Normandy popped out of the relay, Liara closed her eyes as relief washed over her. She uttered, "Thank the Goddess!" and cast out her mind to search for a link with the commander. Her heart clenched in fear when she found nothing but an empty void. Riana saw the Normandy's arrival and turned to Liara with a smile. She saw Liara's face go suddenly pale and Riana stepped quickly
Liara didn't answer. Instead, she gripped the communications panel and spoke urgently into the comm unit. "Aletheia to Normandy. Do you copy?"

Joker's hesitant voice came back after a brief delay. "Roger that, Aletheia. You are loud and clear."

Liara took a deep breath and asked the question she dreaded the answer to, her voice surprisingly calm. "Joker. Where the hell is Shepard?"

Joker prayed that what he said next was not a lie. "I was ordered to get the Normandy and crew clear. The ground team is following in the shuttle."

Garrus announced his purpose, looking for volunteers for the rescue and recovery mission and the entire remaining cast of ground team members had joined him on the shuttle. Edi directed them to the entrance nearest the commander's personal beacon. The team watched the Normandy depart for the relay as they climbed out of the shuttle and once more entered the Collector base. In the meantime, Shepard's team had continued to dig madly through the rubble, working toward that same personal beacon. Grunt finally heaved a piece of rubble off to the side and revealed Shepard's boot, giving firm direction to the rest of their digging.

Miranda was surprised when Garrus' voice came over the comm. "Anybody copy? Don't leave us hanging, here! Ground team. Do you copy?"

Miranda came back quickly. "What are you doing here? I told you to clear out!"

Garrus chuckled in relief. "No, you told the Normandy to go. The rest of the ground team is here with me and the shuttle. We're clearing the path for you. Lock onto my signal and come toward us as we work our way to you. It's the shortest and fastest way out of here! Have you found Shepard?"

While they were talking, they had dug the commander the rest of the way out of the rubble and Miranda had knelt by her side to assess her condition. Shepard remained unconscious, a deep gash ran down the side of her head and her left shoulder, arm and hip were broken. Miranda shuddered, knowing that if Shepard hadn't completed the bone weave, her left side most likely would have been crushed and they would have only been recovering her body. "Yes, but she's severely injured, including a head wound and she's unconscious." She waved at Grunt as she spoke, indicating he should pick her up. "Grunt is carrying her and we're working our way to you now, but we have less than three minutes to clear the station!"

Garrus growled. "The way behind us is open! You make it to us, we're home free!"

Grunt broke out into a dead run, Miranda and Jack flanking each side of him throwing warps and shockwaves to clear the path. It was a good thing Shepard was unconscious, because Grunt was none too gentle. His focus was completely on speed, not the comfort of his charge. They didn't worry about slowing down to finish any of the Collectors off; they just needed to move forward as fast as they could manage. They met up with the other team and the combined firepower and a few grenades dropped as they ran easily covered their retreat.

Harbinger was not pleased, but refused to admit defeat. As the team fled, his voice echoed through the halls, his words making it evident he either didn't understand or didn't care that the team was composed of nearly every race. His focus was purely on Shepard, who wasn't even awake to hear his threats. "Human. You've changed nothing. Your species has the attention of those infinitely
your greater. That which you know as Reapers are your salvation through destruction.

The shuttle engines had never been shut down and it was already hovering as the team clambered aboard, Tali at the controls. As Garrus was slamming the door behind them he shouted, "Go! Go! Go!"

Tali pushed the throttles to max and dove through the debris field. Joker and Edi had used the twin Thanix cannons to blast a clear path for them so, unlike when they came in, the way out was a straight shot. Miranda looked at the countdown showing on her omnitool and called out, "Detonation in ten, nine, eight..."

The relay activated and they made the jump as Miranda's count hit two.

The Normandy's crew had been hopeful and the bay doors were standing open and ready for the shuttle when it emerged from the relay, fully expecting the ground team to beat the clock and escape safely. The shuttle blasted out of the relay and Tali kept the throttles at max, successfully completing a high-speed combat landing on the Normandy. Joker had breathed a sigh of relief when he got the call to have an emergency medical response team waiting. Even though it wasn't the best scenario, things could have been much worse. Shepard was immediately transferred to the med bay, where Karin Chakwas and Mordin Solus were already scrubbed and ready for whatever came through the door. Seeing the severity of the head wound, Karin didn't waste any time. She shouted something at Miranda and immediately sealed the med bay doors, barking surgical orders to her support staff. It was going to be a long day.

As soon as the shuttle had docked and the shuttle bay doors had closed behind it, a frightened and angry Liara requested permission to come up the port side and dock alongside. The shuttle was back and she still couldn't sense Shepard, and she stubbornly refused to contemplate the most likely reason why. As soon as the door opened, she blasted out of the airlock only to run full speed into a ready and waiting Miranda Lawson.

"Slow down, Liara! She's here, but she's unconscious. That's the only reason why you can't sense her!" Miranda had clasped both of the Asari's upper arms to keep them both from stumbling as a result of the collision. "Take a deep breath. She's in good hands... Karin has it under control."

"Oh, Goddess! Thank you!" Liara almost collapsed when she heard the news, as all the energy generated by her fear vanished in an instant. Only Miranda's supportive grip and Riana stepping up and placing a comforting hand against the small of her back kept her on her feet as tears of relief trickled from her eyes. Liara's shoulders slumped with her diminishing mental anxiety and she began to relax and recover. What had happened when she stormed onto the Normandy finally registered at the conscious level and she focused on her welcome messenger when she realized what she had done. Her eyes reflected genuine concern as she spoke. "I'm so sorry, Miranda. Are you alright?"

Miranda laughed at the quick return of Liara's more typical level-headedness and smiled at the sincerity of the question. There was a time when those words would never have crossed the Asari's lips aimed in her direction. "Don't worry about it, Liara. I'm fine." Miranda changed her focus to what she knew the Asari really wanted to know. "You won't be able to see her yet; the privacy shades are down and the med bay is sealed for surgical sterilization. You'll just drive yourself crazy with worry if you stand outside the door pacing. Karin will tell us what's going on the minute she has a moment to breath." She looked to Riana. "Why don't we focus on swapping places and get settled into our respective quarters on each ship?"

Liara glanced longingly toward the elevator before Riana grabbed her shoulders and turned her
reluctantly around to face back onto the *Aletheia*. "It's an excellent idea, Mistress. It will keep you busy and then you won't have to waste time doing it after Shepard awakens."

Liara let out a deep sigh of resignation. "Yes. Of course you're right. My time is better spent that way. Just please tell me her status and make sure Karin knows I'm here."

Miranda laughed. "You think I came up with that on my own? Karin's the one that told me to intercept you here... just before she slammed the door in my face and locked me out of the med bay!"

As they worked, Miranda explained in great detail what happened when they got to central control and found the Human Reaper. Liara's face paled and reflected shock at the atrocities the Reapers had already committed, such that she didn't yet dare contemplate what their future war with them would hold. She shuddered and turned her complete attention to Miranda as the operative finally got to how Shepard was when they found her. Liara closed her eyes and dipped her head as she leaned on one of the equipment crates for support. "May her Gods be with her."

They got all the equipment moved over to the Normandy cargo hold and had Miranda firmly ensconced and in command of the *Aletheia* before the call came. Liara answered eagerly and the group made their way quickly to the med bay upon getting the news. She was surprised when Karin met them outside the door and wouldn't let any of them enter. The privacy shades were still in place, so Liara was frustrated that she couldn't even get a peek at her promised. Her exasperation and impatience were evident enough that Karin raised her eyebrows and gently scolded her. "That attitude will get you nowhere near Shepard, Liara. She needs calm and quiet for a bit. Her head injury was severe and we've done all we can for now. We're working on reducing the remaining swelling and until that happens, it's very unlikely she'll regain consciousness."

She smiled to soften the news. "Relax and take a deep breath. All the bone stitching and soft tissue repair went very well and I don't anticipate any complications." She looked pointedly at Miranda. "Had she not let me complete that bone weave, the blow would have likely crushed her skull and we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Liara drew in a sharp breath as Miranda pointed at her. "Don't look at me. It was this one that convinced her to get the enhancements, not me."

"Well then. Thank you both. One for the technology and the other for the push to use it. I don't fancy considering the alternatives. Now. I'll only let in one at a time, so I'm going to let Miranda in first, so she can get back to work." At the first sign of protest from Liara, Karin pointed an accusatory finger at her. "Not a word. I know you. Once you get in that room, we won't be able to get you out again without an explosion or a sedative... the latter of which I am not above using should it become necessary, so don't tempt me."

Liara glared at Karin; even knowing how correct the woman was in her assessment of the situation, it still irritated her. She wanted, needed, to see Shepard. "Fine." She stepped back and crossed her arms with an impatient huff.

Miranda glanced at her in apology. "I won't be long, I promise."

Miranda was true to her word, only telling the sleeping commander that she needed to get well before Liara tore a hole in a bulkhead in her frustration, and that she expected a call on the *Aletheia* once the commander was up and about again. She bent over and lifted Shepard's good hand to her lips, kissing it gently. "You've become a good friend, Shepard. Take care, and I'll be in touch soon."
I promise."

While the departing XO was in with the commander, Karin gave Liara and Riana the full rundown on everything she did in the surgeries and Shepard's expected recovery times. When she finished, Riana quietly stepped away, leaving Liara to enter the room next. "I will go to the office and start setting up the equipment. It is you who needs to be with Shepard. Unlike Miranda, I'll be here when the commander wakes."

When Miranda stepped out, Riana walked her to the airlock, said her goodbyes to Judea, and wished them all safe travels aboard the Aletheia before heading back to the Normandy cargo bay to start moving the equipment and her personal belongings to her new quarters and Broker office. As the Aletheia undocked and moved away, the Normandy turned toward Omega. As they docked, the temporary XO, Jacob Taylor, made a pre-scripted announcement from the Bridge. "Attention all personnel. We are in the process of docking on Omega Station. We will be here for only four hours. This vessel has been commandeered from Cerberus as a Spectre vessel and at the end of the four-hour period she will be headed to Citadel space. Those of you who desire to remain free can depart the Normandy any time before the ship departs Omega. After that time, any Cerberus personnel remaining may be subject to incarceration, as per Citadel law. Shepard wanted to thank all of you for your outstanding service and give you this chance to avoid imprisonment by C-Sec. I would highly recommend you take her up on the offer, pack your personal belongings and depart at your earliest opportunity. It is safest for each of us to find our own way from here. Taylor, out."

Liara was shocked. She had not expected the announcement and looked to Karin for an explanation. The doctor smiled. "You know Shepard. Always thinking ahead and planning. She knows that no matter how loyal the crew is to her, those born and raised within Cerberus don't have a chance with the Council or the Alliance for clemency or pardons. She got to know them over the course of the mission and realized most don't hold the Illusive Man's Human dominance ideals to heart... most came on this mission to either save their own families out in the colonies or get revenge because they were already taken. Shepard wanted to give them all a chance to disembark at a relatively neutral location, before we head to dry-dock on Illium. Thanks to Jacob's announcement, they'll all think we're heading to the Citadel, so even with the few that return to him, the Illusive Man won't look for us on Illium as long as we remain discreet. Only the prior Alliance personnel will go all the way to the Citadel. And you already know our devoted non-human crew members don't plan to take their leave until we depart Illium, to head out in their own directions. Shepard was going to deliver the speech, but... well, circumstances obviously dictated otherwise."

Liara smiled and shook her head. "She always puts others first. It wouldn't be Shepard otherwise. Knowing people are starting to depart the Normandy does make me think though... where does the Geth unit stay?"

Karen looked at her curiously. "Legion? He stays in the AI core, right here behind the med bay. Why?"

"As you said, Shepard is always thinking. I believe I have an unmarked, untraceable Broker shuttle sitting downstairs for him. The last message Shepard sent before she hopped the relay was somewhat cryptic, but I'm pretty sure the request was for the Geth." A still smiling Liara let out a little laugh. "Not like it can just step off the Normandy onto Omega or Illium."

Given Shepard's injuries, Karin thought it very good that Liara was able to trust in the commander's recovery enough to find it within herself to laugh. Liara had faced more than her share of adversity and matured a lot in the last two years. Karin smiled in return. "You have a point, but enough business talk. Since I know you'll be staying with us, you should try to get some sleep."
Liara’s eyes fell to the sleeping form beside them, so Karin reassured her. "She won’t be awake for at least six hours, maybe eight, and I know you'll want to be rested when that happens, so I promise to wake you the moment she begins to stir."

Liara was already shaking her head as Karin stood and took her hand, drawing the Asari up with her. "I have a monitor on her. I swear I'll alert you the instant anything changes. Go to the loft and get some sleep, Liara. Doctor's orders."

Liara knew how insistent Karin could be when it mattered, so she acquiesced, but only on the condition that Karin let her spend a few moments alone with Shepard first. Karin nodded. "Of course. I'll step out and get myself some tea."

As the door slid shut, Liara stepped to the bed and took Shepard's right hand. She yearned to run her fingers through Samantha's auburn hair, but was unable to because of the bandage wrapped around her skull. Instead, she sat beside her and pressed Shepard's open hand to her cheek for just a moment before turning her head and gently kissing her palm. Liara spoke softly. "I told you before; you always lead with your left. Look what it got you this time... but you did it to save Miranda's life, so I can't really fault you. I'd expect nothing less." She squinted her eyes against the threatening tears and drew a shaky breath. "Come back to me soon, Siame. I love and miss you." Unconscious or not, Liara would have sworn she felt Shepard squeeze her hand in response and it brought a small smile to her face. "Sleep well, Love. I'll be back soon."

The network was not yet operational on the Normandy so there was nothing she could do but fret over Shepard or get in Riana's way, so Liara bid farewell to Karin and worked her way to the loft, kicked off her boots and slid onto the bed. She hugged Shepard's pillow and took in a deep breath of leather and musk. She hadn't realized just how tired she was and before she knew it, she was sleeping soundly, surrounded comfortingly by the familiar scent of Shepard.

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At the end of the four hours, Joker guided the Normandy away from Omega, refueled at the local depot and began a leisurely trip to the Illium dry-docks for their much needed repairs. The ship was eerily quiet and Joker didn't like it; it felt too much like it did just after the Collectors had taken the crew. The ship was empty of basically everyone but the ground crew. Even Jacob and Miranda were now gone, but in a way they had been replaced by Liara and Riana. Ken Donnelly, Gabby Daniels and Karin Chakwas were the big exceptions. Still, given what they had accomplished, the atmosphere should have been much more celebratory, but with the Reapers looming in the not-too-distant future, an uncertain acceptance by the Alliance hanging over their heads and Shepard unconscious in a med-bed, Joker didn't feel very triumphant.

After Shepard's intervention, Joker and Edi had finally come to a truce and they quickly came to realize they were much more effective working as a team. After the Collector attack, the amazing level of concern Edi had shown for him had been comforting, so with time to kill, Joker took it upon himself to try to explain to Edi why she had to be careful when any unfamiliar Alliance personnel were on board, as there would be in their very near future. Concerned with the Alliance stance toward AIs, he had told her, "You need to keep your independence a complete secret until someone you trust tells you otherwise. Just pretend you're a standard VI."

Edi was appreciative of the warning and promised to spend her dry-dock time on Illium devising a subroutine to act as a buffer for when they had any unfamiliar personnel aboard the Normandy.

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Liara was pinged by the Normandy's AI, waking her from a sound sleep. Karin had sent word that
Shepard was showing signs of waking and knew Liara would want to be there. Liara jumped off the bed, pulled her boots back on, brushed her teeth and hurried to the med bay, only to engage in light conversation with Karin as they watched the commander drift in and out of consciousness for a couple more hours. Finally, Shepard's green eyes lost their fog and remained open long enough to recognize that she was in the Normandy's med bay... and that Liara was sitting next to her, watching her intently. She went to move her hand and quickly realized it wasn't going anywhere, already captured by a pair of blue ones holding it securely in place. Shepard's voice was low and gravelly, but fully understandable when she spoke. "Hey."

Karin's head came up from her monitor screen at the sound and she watched Liara's face light with joy. She realized that Liara was probably better therapy for Shepard at this point in time than she could ever be, so as much as she wanted to check on the commander, she sat quietly and gave them a few minutes to themselves while she finished up the report she was working on.

Liara smiled and squeezed Samantha's hand. "Hey yourself. Welcome back."

Shepard's eyelids fluttered and she forced them back open again, working to remain awake. "Thanks. I think. How long?"

Liara raised her brow markings. "How long have you been out, or how long have I been sitting here?" One of her hands went to Shepard's lips and kept her from talking. "Shhhh. I'll answer both. You've been on the Normandy for about nine hours, two of them spent in surgery. I don't know exactly how long you were out before they recovered you and got you here, other than it was less than the ten minutes it took to overload the station. I've been sitting with you the last couple of hours, watching you drift in and out. I wanted to be here for you when you woke." A soft smile again touched the Asari's face. "I love you, Samantha."

"I love you too, Blue. More than anything." Shepard let her eyes close to dim the bright lights of the med bay. "So what happened? I've got a hell of a headache."

Liara was immediately concerned. "Do you not remember?"

Shepard smiled. "I'm good up to the point of the platform crash. I remember rushing Miranda to get us clear of falling debris... and that's it."

Liara breathed a sigh of relief knowing Shepard's memory was intact and gave her a quick rundown of what she knew of everything that happened while Shepard had been unconscious. With the information she had gotten from Miranda, Karin and Jacob, she certainly had the big picture and it was actually a pretty good summary. She ended the update with the knowledge they were approaching Illium and would probably be docking within the next hour. Karin waited for Liara to finish her summary before walking over. "Welcome back, Shepard."

"Thanks, Karin. I guess I owe you another Serrice Ice, huh?" Shepard smiled as Karin chuckled softly.

"If you owe anyone this time 'round, it's Garrus. He led a ground team to go back for you. From what Miranda said, if he hadn't cleared the exit path, they wouldn't have gotten you off the station in time. You would have all perished in the explosion from the reactor overload. They literally jumped the relay with only two seconds to spare."

Shepard's eyes flew back open. "Holy shit! What the hell were they thinking?"

Even Liara's head snapped around and she involuntarily tightened her grip on Shepard's hand. Miranda had not told her it had been that close... and just as Sha'ira had foretold, Garrus had
delivered Shepard safely back to her. Shaking off the memories, she glared at Shepard and hissed her response, obviously displeased with Shepard's reaction to the news. "Don't you dare question them for doing what you do every mission! They were thinking about saving your life and repaying all the loyalty and dedication you have consistently shown to them!"

Appropriately chastised, Shepard closed her eyes against Liara's penetrating stare. "Sorry... It's just that..." She sighed and shook her head. "Never mind. You're right. I always expect it from myself but I fail to appreciate how much they want to do the same for me. I just hate that they would risk the entire team for one person."

Liara's gaze softened. "You are so much more to them than 'just one person,' Shepard. You are their leader, their inspiration... their hope. When you disappeared, everything fell apart... only to be rebuilt when you came back. The Illusive Man was right about one thing. This war needs you, Shepard. I need you."

Tears dribbled down Shepard's cheek, leaking from beneath her still closed eyelids, and her voice shook with emotion. "Sometimes... I don't want to be that person, Liara. Sometimes I get tired and simply want to be your bondmate. Just that. Nothing else."

Liara's heart ached, hearing Shepard's anguish. "You will always have that, SIame. You will never lose me." Liara looked to Karin for support and saw her sad expression before the doctor schooled her emotions and spoke.

"Shepard. Our pace has been frantic and you were severely injured. It's no wonder you're feeling tired. No one will blame you for that, but you've got time to rest while we're on Illium getting the hull repairs completed. Do you think you can stand? I'm more than happy to release you to Liara's care in the loft. All you need is bed rest and you'll be much more comfortable in your own bed."

Shepard sniffed and her eyes cracked open, scarcely willing to believe she heard Karin correctly. "Really?"

Karin smiled. "Yes, really. You're my only patient and I don't anticipate any missions or firefights any time soon. I can monitor your vitals remotely and I trust Liara to look out for your best interests."

"I'm certainly willing to give it a try." Shepard started to sit up right away, only to be stopped by a firm hand on her chest.

Karin smirked. "You are the eager one, aren't you? But you need to let me disconnect all the sensors first or every alarm in the place will be ringing."

Shepard did little the next couple of days but sleep and eat, with Liara taking frequent breaks from the Broker network to check on her. She also made sure Shepard woke for meals, bringing her meal trays to the loft. By the second day, Shepard was able to get out of bed to eat at the table without getting dizzy. At lunch, Liara's face was solemn, prompting Shepard to ask what was wrong. Liara's face pinched with regret and she sighed. "There's no gentle way to tell you, Shepard, but Miranda compiled the casualty list and sent it to me."

Shepard set her fork down slowly and stared silently at the datapad in Liara's hand for a moment. When she did speak, her voice was hushed. "I figured we'd lost some, but it was difficult to tell with the mix of crew and colonists. There was so much going on..." She finally looked up to meet Liara's eyes. "How many?"
Liara held the pad out to her. "Eighteen."

"Damn it." Shepard closed her eyes. "The group looked to be well over our crew complement of fifty."

Liara's eyes were pained, but she put a light smile on her face for Shepard's sake. "That's because you recovered twenty-seven colonists."

Shepard shook her head and sighed. "Yeah. I guess we should be happy we stopped the Collectors and came back with a net gain." Shepard glanced down the names on the pad. "Most of them I hardly knew, but Kelly Chambers was my Yeoman. I spent months on this ship, Liara. Yet because they were Cerberus I never bothered to talk to most of them until we were doing final preparations for the relay jump. It was a mistake I won't repeat." She pushed her plate away from the edge of the table and stood up.


Shepard glanced at the pad in her hand again. "Not hungry anymore, Blue. I was their captain. I've got eighteen letters to write and their final messages to forward to the families."

Liara knew it wasn't an argument she could win, so clasped Shepard's shoulder gently and nodded knowingly. "Let me know if I can bring you anything." She turned and left the loft, leaving the captain to work her unpleasant task.

The third day, Shepard asked Karin if she could actually eat at the mess with the crew. The doctor approved and Kasumi made an unexpected appearance and was more than happy to make dinner. Garrus pitched in and made dishes for himself and Tali, since they needed dextro-compatible meals and Kasumi was at a loss. Shepard effectively turned dinner into an impromptu staff meeting and got back up to speed on the status of all the Normandy crew. She knew that Jacob had convinced all the Cerberus personnel to depart on Omega, but she discovered that Zaeed had left them as well, Omega being where he had joined the team anyway. Shepard looked at Mordin. "I'm surprised you didn't return to the clinic."

Mordin shrugged. "Clinic operating fine. No plague, no challenge. Will first return to Sur'Kesh after visiting the Citadel. Talk to Dalatrasses. Build support for war, if possible. Then will need something else. Perhaps pursue cure for Kepral's Syndrome. Or Genophage. Possibilities endless."

Shepard loved the idea of a cure to either issue, if not both, but was worried about Mordin's plans. "You're not planning to stay on board with us all the way to the Citadel, are you? I'm afraid you might be arrested by C-Sec..."

Liara interrupted. "It's alright, Shepard. My fault. With everything else we've been discussing, I forgot to tell you. I used Cerberus' reputation as anti-Human to get clearances for certain non-Human crew members that you recruited personally. Mordin, Garrus, Grunt, Thane and Samara will be staying with us, as will Kasumi, but only because she plans on getting off the Normandy the same way she got on... As she put it, 'secretly and whenever she's good and ready.'" Liara smirked at the master thief, who was doing her best to hide under her ever present hood.

Shepard smiled at the thief. "Happy to have you aboard, Kas. You're welcome to stay as far as Earth, if that's where you want to end up, but the ship will go into retrofits there to comply with Alliance standards. They'll start with a full EM scan followed immediately by a full sanitation protocol. Not exactly good for your health, so to be safe, I want you off right after we dock. Deal?"
"Thanks, Shep. How'd you know I was headed back to Earth?" Kasumi tipped her head in question.

"You forget who my bondmate is?" Shepard looked at Liara with a twinkle in her eye. "She knew you had a small ship at the Citadel, and that it was transported to dry storage in Japan. I just figured you would go home for a bit before you started your next adventure."

Kasumi looked from Shepard to Liara. "Remind me to never get on your bad side. I think you two together make quite the formidable adversary."

Liara deadpanned in her most serious voice. "Don't ever attempt to steal from me and we'll be just fine, Ms Goto."

When nervous glances started to shoot around the table, all the old guard from the original Normandy busted out laughing, Garrus especially. "Ahhh, Liara. You really shouldn't do that anymore. Now that you're the Shadow Broker, you actually have the assets to back that up. People will think you're serious and you'll give the poor girl a heart attack."

Kasumi perked up, quickly picking up on the joke. "On the flipside, you'd make an excellent ally, Liara. Maybe we can talk business when this is all over."

Liara smiled. "It'd be a pleasure, Kasumi. I'm sure the Broker would be more than happy to employ a person possessing your... unique... skills. I'm sure there will be some technology or tools we could borrow from the Illusive Man to help in the war against the Reapers."

The rest of dinner was relatively uneventful and filled with mutual thanks passed around for support throughout the mission. Karin could tell the commander was uncomfortable with all the praise and broke up the party by ordering Shepard back to her room for rest. Ken and Gabby caught up to them just before she and Liara entered the elevator and thanked the commander personally for getting to the Collector base so quickly. Gabby was almost in tears when she told Shepard she had just given up, having watched the person in the pod next to her dissolve, screaming in pain. "And then you all ran around the corner and started breaking the pods open. I prayed to God you got my pod open before it happened to me." Her eyes met Shepard's with complete and utter devotion. "You saved us. I'll go to Hell and back for you, Commander."

Shepard was at a temporary loss for words, so just hugged Gabby tight. When she released the Chief, she told them both about her plan to use her Spectre status to get them pardoned by the Alliance and assigned back to the Normandy when the time came. Both of them were adamant about there being no place they'd rather be assigned.

When Shepard and Liara got back to the loft, Shepard immediately walked downstairs and sunk onto the couch, her eyes closed and her head rolled back in exhaustion. Liara eyed her critically and very carefully climbed onto the couch on her knees, facing Shepard and straddling the commander's lap, watchful to sit on her own legs and not put any weight against Shepard's recently repaired hip. Shepard's eyes didn't open but her lips curled into a light smile. "Well. Hello there, Dr T'Soni."

Liara's hands lit with a soft blue glow and she ran her hands across Samantha's chest and shoulders. "How are you feeling, other than tired?"

"A lot better now." The smile didn't leave as Shepard asked, "Why do you ask?"

Liara was so focused on Shepard's wellbeing, she completely missed the innuendo in the commander's tone. Her voice was hesitant and reflected confusion as she answered. "Because I care for you... Do I need any other reason?"
Shepard's eyes cracked open and Liara's heart melted at what she was there. The unadulterated love was plainly evident as Samantha captured her hands and brought one at a time to her lips to sensuously kiss Liara's palms. She released Liara's hands and tapped her middle fingers to her temples. "Because, Ionún Álainn. I miss you, and with the way you climbed up on my lap, I was thinking you miss me, too."

"Shepard." Liara's voice was an odd mix of chastisement and longing. "You know that Karin said a full week. We have three more days... Though I'm sure you must realize I want to..." Her hands moved up to the auburn hair she so loved and pushed gently through the soft strands, loving the feel of the silken threads as they slid between her fingers.

With Liara's hands occupied high, she had no defense when Shepard grabbed her hips and pulled her quickly forward, wrapping her hands around and pressing skillfully into Liara's lower back. "I know you do, which is exactly what makes you so irresistible."

Liara's breath hitched and her head involuntarily fell back as she groaned in pleasure before she could stop herself. "Oh, Goddess." She gasped and tried to catch the breath that suddenly deserted her. "Shepard! That is NOT fair."

Liara felt a hot flash of desire run straight to her core as her body reacted in complete rebellion to what her mind knew was the proper course of action. The few times they had been together over the last couple of months, circumstances had conspired against them and limited the chances at true intimacy. This time, the 'circumstance' was Shepard's head injury, but that didn't change the fact that it had been awhile and Shepard was right... Liara did miss her. She could already feel dampness soaking her panties under the commander's expert touch.

Shepard wrapped her arm tight around Liara's torso, using her forearm to keep the pressure on Liara's lower back as she hugged her tight, preventing retreat. She took advantage of Liara's temporary lapse in self control to quickly untuck the Asari's shirt and slip a hand inside to massage Liara's breast. "Karin said no melding... My bones are all healed. There's no limitations on the physical side. Nothing says I can't pleasure you..."

Liara was finding it hard to protest. Her mind was craving the link and it was taking all her concentration to keep from reaching out for that mental connection that was now second nature between them. In the meantime, her body was reacting all on its own to Shepard's ministrations, completely devoid of conscious thought and completely out of her control to stop. She felt one nipple harden as Shepard rolled it gently between her fingers and Liara was having to work so hard at holding back the link, she didn't even realize Sam had pushed her shirt all the way up until a wet mouth wrapped around the other, teeth and tongue quickly teasing that nipple to a hard point as well. She gasped in surprise, "Shepard! Please!"

Liara wasn't really sure what she was begging for. Her body wanted Shepard to continue and was definitely reacting, but she was afraid she couldn't hold back from melding and didn't want to risk Shepard's recovery for a moment of pleasure, so she found herself in a stalemate, her body saying yes while her mind said no, unable to get both moving in the same direction, one way or the other with what she actually wanted Shepard to do. Her head came forward and she looked at the commander, eyes somewhat unfocused and she was hardly able to speak. "I... I don't..."

Even without the link, Shepard understood Liara's dilemma. She saw the confused anguish on Liara's face the same time she felt the excited tremors passing through the Asari's body, so worked quickly to limit the length of time her lover would need to maintain control. Liara's cerebral deadlock became suddenly irrelevant when she felt the clasp on her pants come undone and Sam's fingers slipped through her wet folds. Skipping all the normal teasing and slow build, Samantha
penetrated immediately upward and, without hesitation, practiced fingertips dragged expertly across the Asari's inner wall. Liara's hips jerked spasmodically in response, relishing in the contact and all she could do in response was clamp down on her thoughts to keep herself from seeking the union. Her hands gripped hard onto the back of the couch as her body shuddered violently and a desperate whimper escaped Liara's throat as she surged with pleasure, coming hard on Samantha's hand. She let out a choked sob of relief following the physical bliss that rippled through her body unabated, her pulsing nub finding gratification against the heal of Shepard's hand as those expert fingers drew out the remains of her pleasure.

Liara practically collapsed forward, wrapped her arms around Shepard's shoulders and nuzzled into her neck, panting as she still struggled to maintain control of her thoughts as the last of the aftershocks rumbled pleasingly through her core. Shepard's hands first massaged her hips before sliding softly up her sides and wrapping her in a hug, pulling her in tight. Shepard whispered softly into her ear, "I've got you, Love."

When the aftershocks completely faded, Liara slowly felt the tension in her mind die away as her body settled into her lover's curves and the comfort that was Shepard surrounded her. Her body relaxed as well and Shepard must have felt the change because she slowly shifted, lying sideways on the couch and drawing Liara down with her until they were stretched out flat with the Asari nestled securely within the commander's strong arms. "How is it that you are the one to almost die, yet you end up comforting me?"

A soft rumble rolled through Shepard's chest as she chuckled. "Because you were the one that was frightened. I'm a soldier, willing to accept those risks and always happy when the ultimate price isn't paid." She felt Liara start to tense again at her words, so held her tight and continued in a soft soothing voice. "I pray to the Gods you never get used to it, and I do my best every day to make sure I come home to you, Liara T'Soni. I love you with all that I am. Keep faith in that. Keep faith in me."

"Always, Shepard." Liara slowly exhaled warm air against Sam's neck before propping herself up on an elbow to look down onto Shepard's face. "That was difficult for me... holding back the meld while you made love to me." Sam's brow creased with worry, so Liara smiled reassuringly and hurried to continue. "But it was nothing like the time you repeatedly teased me and drew me to the edge of sanity through purposeful denial." She placed a quick peck on Shepard's lips. "This was... pleasurable. Very.... and I have to wonder if I have just gotten a taste of what it was like for you before you met me. When you had sex... you know, without the ability to meld? If so, then Human sex is very physically enjoyable... but is still... somewhat lacking."

Shepard couldn't help but to laugh out loud.
When Shepard woke late the next morning, Liara was not at her side. Even though it had been that way since her injury, Shepard was still uncomfortable. She liked waking before Liara and missed being able to look upon her lover's serene face as she slept. Sensing her consciousness, a soothing voice came to her though the link. *(I'm already down in the office, Love. Would you like me to bring you breakfast?)*

More than the words, Shepard enjoyed the warm sense of comfort that came along with the connection and smiled. *(I thought we weren't supposed to meld for a few days yet?)*

Liara's amusement made her 'voice' seem light and musical through the link. *(I spoke with Karin this morning, and based on your rate of recovery she felt the link would be a good first step... she did say no union melds yet though. She also said we shouldn't overuse it, so how about you answer my question and we visit in person?)*

Shepard also felt Liara's shyness travel the link with the portion about the union meld and the commander's fondness for the innocent young archeologist traveled back with her response. *(No more deliveries, Blue. I'll take a quick shower and join you in the mess... say in ten?)*

*(I look forward to it, Samantha. I'll see you soon.)* Liara walked toward the rear sleeping area where Riana had recently disappeared and knocked gently. "Riana? Shepard is coming down for breakfast. Care to join us before you go to sleep?"

Liara smiled when she heard Riana stirring, followed by an affirmative statement. "I've already eaten, but since I missed her at dinner last night it will be good to see her. I'll just get some tea or something. I'll be back out in a moment."

They had a nice quiet breakfast and since they were sitting in dry-dock with nothing better to do, Shepard asked Joker to join them. As he hobbled in, Shepard watched in secret satisfaction. After they finished breakfast and Joker stood to return to the Bridge, Shepard stood with him. "Joker. I have to tell you something."

She waited for the pilot to stop and complete his shuffle turn so he was facing her. Something in Shepard's expression made him nervous, but he couldn't pin it down and his anxiety shot through the roof when the commander started to speak. "You've been an awesome pilot for us. I don't believe anyone could have handled the Normandy better. That said, after what happened with the Collector attack, I have concerns about how well you'll be able to perform through the Reaper war with your condition."

Joker's face turned red with anger. "No way, Shepard! Don't you dare tell me you're taking the
Normandy from me! Not now! Not after what we've been through together!"

Shepard growled. "Stand down, Flight Lieutenant! Let me finish!"

Joker glowered and his eyes stabbed daggers at the commander. Shepard stared back at him and continued. "I want you to report to medical. Dr Chakwas is waiting on you. Until she releases you as completely fit for duty, I'm giving Edi the ship."

Joker stood there, incredulous, and his jaw set with fury as he turned to the med bay. "Damn it! I can't believe you'd do this to me, Shepard." Jeff did his best imitation of stalking off angrily toward the med bay; being limited by his brittle bones, he couldn't exactly stomp his feet as he retreated. They could hear him mumbling under his breath as he sulked off. "Such a bitch."

Because of their link, Liara knew exactly what was happening and had kept a perfect poker face, but Riana watched in shock as Shepard turned to her smiling and whispered. "Don't worry, Riana. We have a surprise for him."

Joker entered the med bay and Karin stood to face him, a stern expression on her face. "Good morning, Jeff. I see Shepard has sent you to me for your evaluation."

Joker glared at her. "You are going to clear me for flight, right Doc?"

Karin raised her eyebrows at his tone as the door to the med bay opened again and Shepard, Liara and a very curious Riana stepped in through the door. Karin surprised Joker by smiling. "Of course I am... but not for a few days."

Joker's face now held a very confused expression. He saw the three enter into the med bay behind him and his voice was tinged with the angry fear of cornered prey. "Can someone please tell me what the fuck is going on? You're scaring the crap out of me!"

Shepard couldn't stand it anymore and started laughing, much to Joker's disgruntlement. "Relax, Jeff. Awhile ago, I talked to Karin about my bone weave and if it could help you. She said your bones didn't have enough physical integrity to handle it, but then Miranda shared some additional information about infusing bones with a synthetic enhancer. It was the precursor to the weave technology they developed and used on me. Karin can strengthen your bones, Jeff... and depending on how successful it is, you might still be able to get the weave afterward."

As Shepard explained, Jeff's mouth fell open and his eyes got wide. "Holy crap! That would be... awesome!" His face suddenly went bright red again, but this time not from anger. "Oh, fuck. Shepard... uhm... Sorry about calling you a bitch out there. Guess that was kinda uncalled for, huh?"

Shepard laughed gently. "Don't worry about that, Joker. I would've been pretty pissed too, if I was in your shoes. It was mean." Shepard grinned. "Funny. But still mean." She shook her head. "All the crap you've said to me. All the jokes at my expense... I'd say I was just leveling the scales a bit."

Joker shook his head. "I swear. I'll never pull another prank on you again. Ever. I thought you just let 'em slide. I didn't know you were saving them all up to get even all at once!" He glanced around the room and then focused on Chakwas. "Well. We've got three days yet of dry-dock. Never thought I'd say this, Karin, but I'm happy to be here. Let's get this show on the road, so I'm ready to fly!"

Karin chased them all out of the med bay and closed the privacy shades. As she got to work, Riana returned to her bed and Liara cast Shepard a pleased smile. "I know that procedure set you back a significant sum, Shepard."
Shepard shrugged. "Doesn't matter. It's Cerberus money and in four days when we head to the Citadel, everything that's left is going to be confiscated anyway." She glanced at Liara sadly. "Including me. You ready for that?"

Liara's forehead pinched. "If you're going to bring it up, perhaps we need to go to the loft and talk, Commander."

Shepard raised her eyebrows. "Commander?"

Liara looked at her and Shepard got nothing through the link they had just barely renewed... and the Asari's face was a blank page. "Yes. Commander. This is a very serious subject to me and it's time to fill you in on some things I've been working on."

"Ooooh-kay..." Shepard raised her hand toward the hallway to the elevator. "After you, Dr T'Soni."

When they got to the loft, Shepard wondered just what Liara had done. The Asari's face was deadly serious and not a hint of humor entered her voice as she started talking. "Very well then. It's time."

Shepard sat back and absorbed everything Liara told her. Liara had brokered a deal with the Council to not raise any charges associated with treason against any of the Normandy crew who returned to the Citadel, under the auspices of Shepard's Spectre authority. Shepard's Spectre status would not be revoked, merely suspended for the duration of her Alliance house arrest. In exchange, the Alliance and the Council would get a voluntary full debrief on all her Cerberus missions. Shepard would also turn over every bit of data she had collected on the organization while she had 'worked undercover' within Cerberus. All technology gained and developed by the Normandy crew during that same time period would be distributed to every council race, with the specific exclusion of the Reaper IFF. They didn't want the technology behind the relay getting to anyone outside of specially assigned research and development teams; it was simply too dangerous. When Liara paused, Shepard let out a low whistle. "I sure am glad you're on my side, Blue."

Liara's brow markings rose. "I'm not done yet, Shepard."

Shepard chuckled and sat back. "Lay it on me, Shadow Broker."

Liara's final disclosure concerned putting together the dossiers for all the senior leadership and digging out everything she could use as leverage to protect Shepard while she was in custody. Utilizing the Broker network she had confirmed both Anderson and Hackett were firmly in her corner, along with Hannah Shepard and Sharon Culver. But even with everything that had happened, no one else was truly on her side; should the need arise, they were openly willing to sacrifice her to secure Humanities position within the galactic framework of governance. Liara's voice came out as a dark, angry growl. "You are nothing more than a political tool to them, Shepard. I forewarn you now... I will not stand back and let the Alliance sacrifice you, to the Batarians or anyone else, just for the sake of political expediency. If the Council does not protect you, I will burn the Alliance to the ground to get to you before I let anything happen to you. I swear it."

Shepard started to protest, but Liara cut her off. "I will not lose you again, Shepard." She shook her head angrily as she lost her professional composure and tears came to her eyes. "Not if it is within my power to prevent it. And nothing you can say will change my mind."

"Hey!" Shepard was immediately on her feet and as Liara rose to meet her, they pulled each other into a tight embrace. "Gods, Liara. I love you and I will never deny you that. I'm so sorry if that's what you thought..." Shepard pushed back and cupped Liara's tucked chin, tipping her head up so
they were eye-to-eye. "You are not going to lose me, Ionún Álainn. I swear to you." Shepard rolled her bracelet around on her wrist and whispered in Thessian to remind Liara of the proposal she had made, which suddenly seemed like so long ago. "I made you a promise, Lady Liara T'Soni. You do whatever you need to do to make sure I can keep it."

The block dropped and relief flooded through the link as Liara sighed softly in approval and kissed her. "Thank you, Siame. Not that your disapproval would have changed my actions, but I am glad you agree with me."

The day had finally arrived and the Normandy crew prepared for what was likely their last transit through the Citadel relay for a while to come. Joker was back in the cockpit, but still with a limp and his horrible posture. Karin promised Shepard it was more of a muscle issue now than a reflection of Joker's disease, and there was no medical procedure to generate muscle mass, only to repair existing damaged tissue. The rest was up to Joker and would take time, most likely a couple of years. Recovering from a lifelong illness would not be quick, but at least he didn't need to worry about his bones shattering when he did the physical therapy exercises that would be required for his recovery. Once his muscles developed to the appropriate level, Karin would be able to reevaluate him for the weave procedure, assuming he would still need or even want it at that time.

Shepard was happy for him and started her last crew rounds with a slightly lighter heart. The first folks she needed to talk to were Tali and Jack, because they would both be leaving them before the Normandy departed Illium. Shepard found Jack shoving the last of her stuff into a duffle bag. "You don't have anything in there that belongs to me, do you?"

Jack glared at her. "You really can be a shit, Shepard." As Shepard started to grin, Jack punched her in the arm. "Oh! You're fucking with me! Ya know, you shouldn't do that. You really fucked me up, Shepard. I had a good 'mad girl' thing going on and now I'm almost respectable. Now, I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do next. I feel like I should do something worthwhile, but I got no idea what... other than to stay away from Cerberus."

Shepard's surprise actually made Jack laugh. "What? All your work and you didn't think I was actually redeemable? Hell of a time for me to find out you didn't believe in me!"

It was Shepard's turn to laugh. "Oh, I believe in you... I just didn't realize you actually did yet." Shepard's face turned serious. "Listen, Jack. I talked to a friend of Anderson's out at the Grissom Academy. Aresh has fit in pretty good out there. I think you should go. At least until you come up with a better option. Three squares and a warm bed, and it's not a prison and it's certainly not Teltin. You'd be free to leave any time you want. I'm using my Spectre status to get everyone on the Normandy a full pardon... except for those who are stupid enough to return to TIM. The pardon wipes the slates clean, but it won't cover future acts."

Jack looked at her for a second. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Shepard nodded. "Yeah, Jack. I am. And I'll be honest... I actually have an ulterior motive for once." She ran her hand through her hair before continuing. "You know I'm headed to Alliance lock-up... I need to have people who know the truth out here... and ready to fight the Reapers when they show up. I want you to stay in touch with Liara. At least let her know where you are so when all hell breaks loose I can get you back on the Normandy. You're a hell of a biotic and I like having you at my back. I trust you, Jack, and that says a lot."

Jack suddenly turned away so Shepard couldn't see her face, but the commander could tell she was struggling with her emotions as she answered. "Hell. A school that will allow me to blow shit up
with my biotics doesn't sound too bad. At least for awhile... like you said, until I figure out what's next."

Shepard figured she wouldn't get anything else out of the biotic, so left it at that. "Thanks, Jack. We'll be leaving in about thirty minutes, so I guess I'll see you 'round."

Jack turned back to Shepard, her emotions back under control. "Yeah. Thanks, Shepard. I'm headed out now, so I'll see ya when the shit hits the fan." She gave Shepard a glare. "And don't even think about trying to hug me goodbye."

Shepard laughed as she walked up the stairs to go find Tali in Engineering. "Wouldn't think of it, Jack. I like all my parts right where they are."

When she stepped into Engineering, Gabby turned immediately. "Tali'Zorah said you'd be here. She said to meet her in Liara's office. She was headed there to say goodbye."

"I'm on it." Shepard shouted back on her way out the door, "Thanks, Gabby!"

Tali had already finished with Liara and had queried Edi as to Shepard's location, so she was standing at the elevator door when Shepard got to the crew deck. She didn't say a word. She just stepped into the elevator, punched the button for the main deck and wrapped her arms around the commander. Shepard could hear her sniffing inside the mask as she returned Tali's embrace. "You tell Kal I kept my promise, and he damned well better do the same, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy."

"I will, Shepard. He's already here waiting for me. You could tell him yourself if you like." Tali's voice picked up some joy talking about Kal'Reegar as they got off the elevator and made their way forward to the airlock.

Shepard smiled. "No. I trust him to take care of you... and we're scheduled to depart in less than twenty minutes, so we need to run final pressurization checks on the hull repairs to get under way. Tough to do that if I keep opening the doors."

"It is, at that," Tali laughed. "I told Liara to make sure those Bosh'tets don't do anything bad to you. I got a feeling from the glint in her eye that she has you well covered. Stay well, Captain."

Shepard hugged her one last time. "You too, little sister."

After Tali stepped out and the airlock sealed behind her, Shepard didn't move; she stood there and just stared at the door. She felt Liara's approach long before the comforting arms wrapped around her from behind. "I know this is hard for you, Sam. You ok?"

Shepard swallowed and blinked away her tears. "Would it do any good to tell you the obvious lie and say yes?" Shepard hung her head and sighed heavily. "They're our family, Li. It's tough to let them out of my sight knowing what's headed our way from somewhere out there in dark space. I hate it. I hate that I can't be out here helping you get ready."

She pulled away from her lover's arms and turned around to face Liara. What she saw in the Asari's face, she could only qualify as sad acceptance. "I'm preaching to the choir, aren't I?"

Shepard smiled at the look of confusion that crossed Liara's face with the statement; there were still plenty of Human idioms she hadn't heard yet. "It's kind of the Human equivalent of 'tides are.' I'm just stating the obvious to someone who agrees with me, about something over which we have little control."

Liara took her hand. "Come with me to the office, Shepard. I still need to work, but wouldn't mind
spending every extra second I have with you."

Shepard used the hand to pull Liara close and kiss her, but then let go and pulled away. "I can't, Love. I still need to settle some things."

Liara felt it come through the link. "The Justicar?"

Shepard nodded. "Yeah. We still have some unsettled business..."

Liara reacted with surprised indignance when she realized through the link what Shepard was referring to. "She threatened to kill me?"

Shepard's face went dark. "A long while back. When she first came on board. Initially, she offhandedly threatened the whole crew, but that's what I need to find out. If she will not accept some flexibility into the code..." Shepard looked at Liara. "I don't know how this will work out, Blue, but I know I can't let her leave this ship free of her oath if she refuses to grant amnesty to the folks who helped me defeat the Collectors."

"Shepard. You cannot go in there alone!" Liara's face was the picture of concern. "You are barely healed from the Collector mission!"

"I have to, Liara. This is between Samara and I." Liara went to argue and Shepard stopped her with a glance. "No, Liara. I have to do this and you cannot come with me. She's still bound to me and I simply won't release her from her oath until I'm sure."

Shepard and Liara walked together to the elevator and dropped down to the crew deck. As they stepped out, Shepard took a very frustrated Liara's hand. "I promise to be careful, Li. Besides. You can listen in and run to my rescue if it starts to get messy."

Liara clenched her jaw for just an instant at Shepard's poor attempt at humor before relaxing again and letting out a deep sigh, knowing she had to trust Shepard's judgment. "You know I won't eavesdrop, Shepard, unless you specifically ask me to. Please come by the office when you're done?"

Shepard noted Liara's concerned expression and promptly answered, "Of course." Shepard squeezed Liara's hand softly before dropping it and heading for the Observation Lounge.

Shepard didn't have a chance to say anything when the door closed behind her. Samara was standing at the large window and staring out into the void of space, but turned quickly as the commander entered. "Shepard. I have been waiting for you. We have unfinished business to discuss."

"Yes. We do." Shepard walked forward slowly, trying to take the measure of the Justicar's mood. "It's time to talk about releasing you from your Oath of Subsumation."

"Yes. But I assume you want to discuss many other things before that. Such as your Dr T'Soni, if I am not mistaken." Samara seemed very calm and that made Shepard somewhat optimistic.

"How you feel about Dr T'Soni is of great importance to me personally, yes, but that is not my primary concern as the captain of this vessel and your oath-holder. You told me you would have to kill me once released from your oath if I made you do anything dishonorable." Shepard started to pace. "We've left a lot of dead bodies in our wake. We just wiped out everything alive that remained of the Protheans. They were modified and indoctrinated, but that doesn't change the fact that I ordered you to help me commit genocide. Do you view that as dishonorable?"
Samara answered promptly. "I believe you did the right thing by destroying that base. They were agents of the Reapers and the Illusive Man believes he has the wisdom to utilize the technology there, but he has neither the wisdom nor the integrity to possess such knowledge. It was a wise decision and you have nothing to fear from me."

"So I'm safe. But we also need to look at the bigger picture. You threatened my crew and my loved one because of their past actions, but you promised to meditate on the issue of their redemption in the event we managed to survive this." Shepard stopped directly in front of the Justicar whose head was bowed in thought. "So now that we've survived, Samara, have we all earned our redemption or will my crew be judged guilty under your code and sentenced to death at your hand?"

"From the very beginning, your cause has been just or I would not have joined your team, Shepard. Some of what we were forced to do along the way was neither kind nor just, but necessary for the greater good." The Justicar's voice was level and free of emotion. "When we originally spoke of this, I also told you that in four hundred years, none had ever challenged my beliefs so thoroughly as you. The greater evil forced our hands in many instances that broke Justicar boundaries, so you are not the only one at a crossroads."

Samara's head came up and she met Shepard's eyes. "During my service to you, I did violate the code, but the oath excuses those lapses; that is the purpose of the oath... to avoid such conflicts when in the service of others. My crossroads is not because of the conflicts themselves, but because I believed our actions to be both necessary and just. With that belief, I now find myself in unexpected disagreement with the Justicar Code I have followed for centuries."

Shepard's eyes widened in surprise and she tipped her head in hopeful curiosity. "So.... What does that mean to our discussion?"

"In spite of the dangers lurking around every corner, you have been a valiant warrior, unshakably dedicated to a just cause. These past few months, I found no fault with your actions. In fact, I have been humbled to be a member of your team. Yet the code would have demanded your death had I not sworn to you." Samara shook her head. "I find myself... in conflict with that resolution. In good conscience, I cannot hold you or your team to a higher standard than to which I hold myself. I do not believe an Oath of Subsumation can excuse my actions without excusing yours... so long as you stayed true to serving the greater good, which you have done without question. Therefore, I ask that you not release me from my oath to you, Shepard."

Shepard looked at her in shock. "You want me to keep you bound?"

Samara nodded. "Yes. The code would require me to take action against you and your crew, and I will not do so. That non-action would cause me to violate the code and I would either have to kill myself as a preventative measure or be hunted down by my sisters. I do not find either of those solutions acceptable in this instance. Not when there is an alternate solution."

Shepard huffed in disbelief. "And I'm that alternative... in keeping you bound by your oath to me."

"Yes. But it is easy enough to expand the charter between us and it will draw no undue attention from the Order. During our pursuit, we verified the Collectors were simply agents to the Reapers. Therefore, our contract is not yet complete. I must continue to put the galaxy before my personal code and I will stay in your service until the Reapers are dealt with." Samara was very matter of fact and seemed to give Shepard little choice or input. She had already decided the matter.

"I would love that, Samara, but I'll be going into Alliance custody. I don't know how that would work." Shepard had been fully prepared to refuse the Justicar her freedom in order to protect her crew, but now that Shepard knew Samara was on their side, it didn't seem right. "There has to be
something else we can do. Some other way to solve this?"

Samara smiled. "Shepard. What is Doctor Solus doing after the mission?"

"He's going to talk to the Dalatrasses." Shepard's eyes lit with understanding. "To build support for the war. Tali will do the same with the Fleet, Garrus with the Turian hierarchy... Can you do the same on Thessia?"

Samara nodded. "Not with the Matriarchy, but certainly within the Order. I will talk to my sisters. We are not many, but we are powerful and the Order wields much influence. While we are prohibited from direct intervention in the government, perhaps they will see what we are doing and support us. We shall see."

"Samara. I..." Shepard shook her head. "Thank you."

"Your thanks are not required, Shepard. Before us lie dangers our civilization has never faced and I must do what I can to aid the fight. I can only hope to reconcile my decisions with the code or die trying. If we both live, we have only delayed the inevitable, but I will not put us at odds, Commander. On that you have my word." Samara turned back to the window and quickly dropped into the lotus position. "Now if you don't mind, Commander. With your acceptance of my decision, I find I have much to meditate on."

Shepard said nothing, just quickly exited the room to seek out Liara. Liara was surprised to learn that Shepard had not released the Justicar from her oath, but even more astonished to find that Samara had requested it be that way. Liara looked at Shepard in admiration. "I have never in my life heard of a Justicar being so swayed. You truly are amazing, Samantha."

Shepard frowned. "I had nothing to do with it. She had already decided on her course before I even went to speak with her. I have shaken her faith in a bedrock institution of Asari culture. I don't see success or joy in that."

Liara recognized Shepard's tone of self-reprisal and immediately knew the commander would be difficult to sway in her current mood, but couldn't let it pass uncontested. "Occasionally, it is good to question cultural foundations to ensure our bedrock institutions keep pace with our modernizing society and do not become antiquated and marginalized. As they are, the Justicars have almost become nothing but fairytales and fantasy vid heroes. They are a vanishing breed. Perhaps forcing them to reevaluate the sutras written many millennia ago will persuade them to update the code to become more relevant to current and future Asari society. There is rarely joy in necessity, but you may actually be doing the Order a favor."

Shepard stared at her. "What the hell was that? I thought you hated philosophy?"

Liara took no offense to the question because the tone Shepard asked it in was almost... amused, meaning Liara had met her objective of diverting Shepard's attitude from a downward spiral with everything that was coming up. "That is not philosophy, Shepard. It is the very heart of archeology... the study of ancient artifacts in an attempt to understand their culture. What would some future being think of today's Asari if we all still utilized guidelines written thousands of years ago?" Liara shook her head. "If it were me, I would see their culture as too slow to adapt, and would not expect them to last long on the galactic scale of time. True, the Justicars are not the Asari society as a whole, but if they do not evolve, even as a subculture they will not last."

Shepard pursed her lips in thought and shook her head. "No time to think about all that now. I'm just happy the crew is safe." She rolled her eyes and glanced playfully at Liara. "I'm sure I'll have plenty of time to debate with myself on the marginalization of the Justicar subculture within Asari
Liara gave her a sidelong look. "Are you making fun of me?"

Shepard looked aghast and placed a hand dramatically on her chest. "Dr T'Soni! I would never!"

The look on the Asari's face made Shepard lunge in and grab her, planting a kiss on her cheek. She had aimed for the lips, but Liara turned her head quickly in rejection. "Ah, Blue. Don't be that way. It's actually something I never thought about."

Shepard released Liara and stepped back in consideration. "I always thought the Justicars were revered and their numbers were low because of the difficulty of their lives. It never crossed my mind that more Asari didn't join up because they didn't think the Justicars were relevant anymore."

Shepard shrugged. "Anyway, I was actually trying to poke fun at me going to jail... but you probably don't find that very amusing either, so it was just in bad taste all the way around... Sorry, Love."

Liara got the impression through the link that Shepard was honestly repentant so spoke quietly, "Apology accepted. Now. I need to get back to work." She gave Shepard a quick peck on the lips. "Thank you for coming by and letting me know we won't have the death of a Justicar on our consciences. Though I still think the solution highly irregular."

"You and me, both. See you tonight for dinner?" Liara's eyes were already refocused on the Broker screen as she grunted to the affirmative. Thinking Liara wasn't really paying attention, Shepard couldn't help herself. "And for mad, passionate sex afterward?" She scooted quickly out the door, laughing as she went, when Liara turned to her with a glare.

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Shepard had one last thing to complete as they popped out of the Citadel Relay in the Widow System of the Serpent Nebula. TIM looked a tad bit upset when the QEC activated. "Shepard. You're making a habit of costing me more than time and money. And I don't appreciate your disappearing act with my ship."

Shepard looked none too pleased in return as she tapped at her ear piece. "Sorry. I'm having trouble hearing you. I'm getting a lot of static on this line."

TIM stood in anger. "Don't try my patience, Commander. The technology from that Collector base could have secured our victory against the Reapers and solidified Human dominance in the galaxy!"

"Spare me the lecture. Cerberus dominance is exactly what I'm going to avoid." Shepard stepped closer to the projection. "I told you from the beginning I wouldn't work for you, that I'd only cooperate to get the mission done. Well, it's done and my period of cooperation is over."

TIM strode closer in answer. "Don't turn your back on me, Shepard! I made you! I brought you back from the dead."

Shepard smiled menacingly. "Your mistake, then. I just called to tell you to stop looking for me. I'm claiming this ship as a Spectre vessel and returning to my position with the Council. I'm at the Citadel now and preparing to turn myself in as we speak." She stepped back and glanced upward. "Joker? Lose this channel."

As the QEC dropped out, Joker laughed. "I have to say, Shepard. That was more gratifying than hanging up on the Council ever was..."
Even though Joker couldn't see her, Shepard was nodding in agreement. "Yes, it was. Bring us on in, Joker." Shepard let out a deep sigh. "It's time."

"That's a big negative, Commander. Your orders have been superseded." Joker had a hard time keeping the laughter out of his voice.

Shepard stopped to think. Garrus? No. She knew who it was before she replied. "Let me guess. Liara."

"Affirmative, Ma'am. She said you promised her dinner and she's not about to let you get arrested before you fulfill your promises." Joker paused for just a moment. "According to Edi, she's awaiting your arrival in the loft."

Shepard stepped into the loft and the only light was the blue glow from the fish tank. Liara was nowhere to be seen. "Li?"

"Down here, Samantha." Liara's voice came from the couch, down the steps and to the right, practically the only spot in the room not visible from the door. As Shepard headed down the steps, Liara stood to greet her.

Shepard froze in her tracks. Liara was wearing an Asari gown that was a deep royal blue satin... a perfect match for her eyes. It was obviously custom-made; designed to highlight every curve and attribute of her striking figure and cut extremely low with a push-up to accent Liara's ample cleavage to its best advantage. It had a see-through, narrow central 'V' section made of a pale blue jeweled lace that made the dress appear to be cut even lower than it actually was. Shepard initially thought Liara's upper chest was bare, but as the Asari sauntered closer, the commander realized the top of the dress was made of a thin material that perfectly matched Liara's skin, so sheer it couldn't be seen at any distance. Shepard was sure it was the only thing keeping the front of her dress up, and it stopped at a neck collar that Shepard had originally mistaken for a choker. As Liara twirled slowly in front of her to show off the new dress, Shepard realized the back was mostly bare, held together at the top with a pair of thin cross straps and the bottom cut just high enough to conceal the tender folds in the hollow of Liara's lower back. The shoulders were also bare, with arm straps made to look as if they had been slipped off the shoulder and hung relaxed on her upper arms. The ensemble was completed with a pair of arm-length gloves that matched the pale blue lace. Liara completed her turn and blushed profusely when she saw the expression on Shepard's face. "I take it you like it?"

Shepard peeled her eyes off of Liara's breasts and focused on the Asari's face before she dry-swallowed, trying to get moisture back in her mouth so she could talk. "I... uh... actually, no." She stepped forward and ran the backs of her fingers gently across Liara's cheek. "I absolutely, positively love it! Where in the galaxy did you get it, because we're buying you one in every color!"

Liara laughed gently, still embarrassed by Shepard's reaction. "I have no idea who makes them... It was a gift. From Sha'ira."

Shepard let out a whistle of appreciation. "Well. She certainly knows how to get under a Human's skin... This one's, at least. Remind me to thank her. Profusely. I mean... just... wow."

Shepard slid her hands around Liara's waist and pulled her close before kissing her slowly and thoroughly, leaving them both breathless. Liara had been on her feet most of the day and she moaned in pleasure as Shepard's hand ran up her back, her fingers gently massaging the muscles along the Asari's spine. "Mmmm. Goddess. That feels wonderful, Samantha. But, dinner..."
Shepard silenced her with a quick kiss. "... can wait."

Liara laughed quietly, her voice deep and throaty with desire. "... is getting cold. Patience, Shepard. We have all night. I am not giving you to the Council until tomorrow morning." Liara pulled herself away. "And I plan on you being very... very tired. You need to eat."

Shepard's eyebrows rose. "Why, Dr T'Soni. Did you just proposition me?"

"I believe, Samantha..." Liara swayed her way elegantly back to the couch and sat down. "...that I am promising you a night to think back on while we are apart. A pleasant memory, if you will."

Shepard followed her lover and sat beside her on the couch, picked up the wine glasses and handed one to Liara. "Then here's to good memories. Though I do believe I am seriously underdressed for the occasion."

After a sip of wine, Liara chuckled. "Consider this as my revenge for all the times you were in civilian clothes on the SR-1, when all I had were the Normandy issue science suits."

She sat her wine glass down and picked up a forkful of something, and leaned over to feed Shepard. "Try this before it gets horribly cold. It's better hot, but you took a bit longer to get here than I thought."

Shepard took it in her mouth. It was a delicate white fish, but she couldn't place it. "What is this? It's excellent."

Liara smiled. "I'm glad you like it. It's maanru. It's a type of Thessian shoaling fish common off the coast of Armali. Since the crew on the Broker ship was mostly Asari, we made sure to get regular resupply from the homeworld. We split up what was left before we all went our separate ways, so I brought this to the Normandy with me."

Shepard nodded. "Makes sense now. I tasted something I couldn't quite place... it's the trace eezo, isn't it? I remember tasting it in the foods I ate when we visited."

"Good memory. That's it exactly. Gives it a bit of zing most don't expect in fish." Liara handed Shepard her plate. "I'm glad you like it. It's one of my favorites."

They chatted easily through dinner talking about nothing consequential, which in Shepard's mind was utterly perfect. When they finished eating, Liara started to pile up the dishes, but Shepard reached over and laid her hand on top of the Asari's and stopped her motion. "Li. We'll get it in the morning. Dance with me?"

Liara's eyes flashed with the happy memory of waltzing with the commander and eagerly agreed. "Will you play Edelweiss?"

Sam smiled. "If that's what you desire, Love."

An emphatic nod from Liara, followed with a "Yes. Please!" found them once again in the middle of the lower floor dancing the waltz. When Liara wanted her to play it again, however, Shepard said no.

Shepard smiled with Liara's reaction. "No pouting. You're getting better, so I'm going to introduce you to a different waltz, that's all. This is Johann Strauss. It's called Tales From the Vienna Woods."

They laughed their way through the first attempt, Liara having a bit of difficulty with the tempo changes. When she got that down, Shepard threw in a twirl, where it was Shepard's turn to be
surprised when Liara handled it with aplomb. At the end of the second time through, Shepard twirled Liara out, then spun her back into her arms and held her tight. With heaving breasts from the faster waltz, Shepard closed her eyes and kissed Liara gently, her heart aching at the idea of the upcoming separation. She opened her eyes and looked lovingly into Liara's eyes. "I love you, Ioniín Álainn. I would be lost without you. You represent everything in the galaxy that is right and good. I still can't believe a simple Vanguard ever got lucky enough to meet the Lady of House T'Soni, but I thank the Gods every day that I did. You are the most beautiful person I have ever met, inside and out. Thank you... for loving me."

Liara's eyes moistened, but no tears fell. "Oh, Shepard. How could I not fall in love with the dashing hero who rescued me and swept me off for a life full of adventure? I love you more than anything. Do not thank me for that. It is the most natural thing in the galaxy to me. I can no longer imagine a life without you."

Liara ran her hand through silken auburn strands and cupped the back of Shepard's head, pulling her forward for a kiss. Clothes were slowly peeled away. Carefully. Tenderly. Nothing more was spoken aloud once they slipped under the bed covers and Liara's eyes faded to black.
As Liara had threatened, morning came much too quickly, announced by an incessant alarm that wouldn't let them sleep anymore. Shepard and Liara dragged themselves from the bed and showered together in silence as emotions flowed freely through their link; they had exchanged through the link all that needed to be said the night before. Now, they both wondered what the near future would bring. How the debriefs would go with the Council, if they would transport Shepard to Earth as a prisoner or if Anderson would allow them to stay in the loft together during the transit from the Citadel. All became questions for later as Joker piped in that the Council had issued its docking instructions for the Normandy. They dressed quickly, Liara in her standard light armor and Shepard in a set of dress blues that Hackett had delivered to her when he came on board after Aratoht. The commander's customized N7 armor and weapons would all remain on board the Normandy in her equipment locker, with the promise that Samantha would once more command the ship when the time came to start the battle with the Reapers.

The ship pulled into the secure dock and as soon as the clamps engaged Joker piped over the comm. "Councilors Anderson and Tevos requesting permission to come aboard, Commander."

Shepard looked at Liara and gave her blue hand one last squeeze before dropping it and standing at attention. "Permission granted. Open the airlock, Flight Lieutenant."

Anderson and Tevos came aboard and Shepard snapped a salute. "Welcome to the Normandy SR-2, Councilors."

Anderson returned the salute and as their hands dropped Anderson looked to the commander. "Damn good to see you, Shepard. I just wish it was the hero's welcome you deserve, instead of this bullshit."

Tevos dipped her head. "Welcome home, Shepard. As odd as it may sound since we are technically here to arrest you, I have eagerly awaited this day... to have you back in the fold again. I am sorry for this interim... inconvenience."

Shepard shrugged. "None of it will matter when the Reapers arrive, Councilor. I just hope we have enough time to get ready for them."

"Yes, well. We can pray to the Goddess that people are willing to listen, but so far they have been very resistant to accepting such dire news. I can't really blame them, but their lack of cooperation is still troubling." Tevos turned to Liara. "Dr T'Soni. Welcome to the Citadel. I believe we have an agreement for me to take five persons under the protection of the Asari Republics? I have their pardons in my possession and I will ensure they get appropriate transportation to their final destinations. I take it that will be satisfactory?"

Liara gave Tevos a troubled smile and dipped her head in recognition of the councilor's position. "Yes, Councilor. That is acceptable." She turned and called the five forward before directing her
words to Tevos again. "Nothing has changed since we last exchanged correspondence. Urdnot Grunt, Garrus Vakarian and Justicar Samara are all heading back to their respective home worlds. Thane Krios has Kepral's Syndrome and Dr Mordin Solus will accompany him to Huerta Memorial to establish him in a treatment program before continuing on to Sur'Kesh. I take it the arrangements are still acceptable?"

Tevos gave a brief nod. "Indeed." She turned back to Shepard. "Commander. I will see you during the Council mission report and debriefing sessions, but I am afraid I must take my leave for now." She glanced over her five new charges. "I have guests to see to."

Shepard gave her an honest smile. "Thanks for your help, Councilor. It would have been difficult to make this all happen without your political influence on the Council. I appreciate the assist."

Tevos ushered the five over and introduced them to her assistant, Dalis Shegos. "This is Dalis. If you need anything before your departure, you simply need call her and she'll make the necessary arrangements. If you'll follow her back to my offices, we'll dispense with the legals and get you all on your way." As the five departed, Tevos turned back to the commander one last time. "Think nothing of it Shepard. We are friends... and you saved my life when you saved the Destiny Ascension. I have not forgotten that, and helping these five is the least I can do. I still owe you much. By the way, Huntress Tenir was denied boarding on the Normandy for political reasons we won't speak of here, but asked me to pass along her regrets that she was not able to welcome you in person."

"Thank you again, Councilor. Shepard frowned. "Please tell her... Tell her I wish circumstances were different, because it would have been nice to see her again. I fear with my incarceration, by the time the next opportunity arises there will be little time for pleasantries."

"Well. I must see to my new charges. I'll see what I can do, Shepard. Perhaps I can get at least a few moments between debrief sessions for her to 'attend to me' and get a chance to see you?" Tevos smiled innocently as her eyes twinkled mischievously.

Shepard smiled in return, dropping the formality momentarily. "I'd like that, Tevos. But don't get yourself in a political jam with my detractors over it. Please."

"Of course not, Commander. It will be fine, I assure you." Tevos directed her attention to Anderson. "David. I'll see you back at Council Chambers. Take good care of her."

Anderson looked grim. "Of course, Tevos. See you soon." He turned to Shepard. "This is nothing but political bullshit, Shepard. I have the pardons for the rest of your crew that will allow them free passage, but you..." Anderson paused and shook his head. "God, I hate this. I have to take you into custody, Shepard. I'm sorry."

"What?" Liara stepped forward angrily. "That was not the arrangement, Councilor. Shepard agreed to turn herself in voluntarily. This is unacceptable!"

Anderson looked at her. "I know, Liara. But until Shepard actually gives the debriefs, turns over the data and all the technology, the deal isn't complete and certain parties are insisting it happen this way. I think it's more for the spectacle of her being led off the Normandy in cuffs than anything. To prove to the galaxy that we're actually 'arresting' her." He growled his next words. "Out here on the secure dock it's fine, but we have to transit the main plaza to get to the Council Tower. Someone tipped them off, so when you arrive, there will be a slew of reporters waiting outside; all waiting like a bunch of vultures to snap a picture of the great Commander Shepard, fallen from grace. C-Sec will cordon a passageway, but there's no way we can stop the pictures or the comments. We'll just have to move you though the crowd as fast as we can."
Shepard looked to Liara first, sensing more than hearing her disquiet. "It's alright, Love. Let them have their fleeting victory. It won't matter in the end... You know that."

Liara's eyes flashed dangerously in response. "I won't make a scene, Shepard, but count on me to find out everyone who is responsible for this." Her gaze shifted to Anderson. "One way or another. And when the Reapers come, they'll be the last ones evacuated... and maybe there just won't be time enough to save them."

Anderson responded quietly, a grim expression on his face. "Don't waste too much of your time searching, Liara. I believe the next time you check your messages, a very short list will be waiting for you."

Shepard looked at Anderson and resolutely held her arms out. "Let's get this over with."

Anderson glanced back over his shoulder. "Lieutenant. It's time."

As Shepard and Liara watched, a mountain of a man walked forward. "Pleasure to meet you, Commander. Sorry about this."

Anderson grimaced as if in pain. "Shepard. Meet Lieutenant James Vega. He's to be your escort the entire time here and en route back to Earth aboard the Normandy."

The commander shrugged her shoulders. "Don't worry about it. Either of you." She still held her arms out, but turned her wrists up to catch Vega's attention. "Do what you need to do and let's get this done."

James stepped up and placed a set of biotic suppression cuffs on her wrists and Anderson stepped up to her side. "Sorry, Shepard." His hands came up and Shepard noticed they were trembling as he removed her rank. He wouldn't look her in the face and he quickly turned to Vega. "Lieutenant. Please escort Spectre Shepard to the Council interrogation rooms, please."

As they stepped out, Anderson held his hand up in front of Liara. "I'm sorry. You can't go with her. Not to this. Can we go to your office and talk, please?"

Shepard stopped and partially turned, looking back at the pair. "Li? Anderson?"

"Sorry, Shepard. Dr T'Soni can't follow you for now. I'll brief her on what exactly is going to happen and I'll catch up to you."

Liara felt Shepard's anxiety climb through the link. {It's ok, Siame. I'm just a thought away.}

Shepard forced a small smile onto her face that Liara could tell she didn't feel before she turned and followed the Lieutenant to face the throng of spectators and reporters.

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"Councilor. No one is here to bother us." Liara watched Shepard's retreating form. "Let's just get this over with, so I can monitor the situation without distraction. My sole purpose here is to ensure our agreement is upheld." She turned back to Anderson with a look of firm resolve on her face. "No harm of any kind shall come to Shepard or there will be serious repercussions to any involved, I promise you."

Anderson raised his eyebrows. "You're right. There will be. She's still a Spectre under the protection of the Council... And apparently, you."
Anderson quickly explained the debrief procedures; where Shepard would be placed in a room and her debriefs would be a matter of going through all her mission reports to clarify any questions the Council members had when they reviewed them. It would be completely non-threatening and everything would be recorded to be entered into the Council Secure Archives. Liara would be unable to see or speak to Shepard for the duration, which Anderson expected to last approximately three days. At that point, Anderson smiled. "Of course, no one but me, Tevos and Hackett know about your ability to communicate telepathically... or whatever it is you call it... and no one needs to know, either. Now, come on. I'll escort you to Tevos office. She can probably make you the most comfortable for your stay here."

They made their way quickly to the Council Tower and had just stepped into the elevator when Liara suddenly gasped and doubled over, falling to her knees with one hand going to the floor to steady herself. Anderson quickly knelt by her side. "Dr T'Soni! What's wrong?"

Liara wheezed, "Shepard... Goddess! She's being beaten!"

Anderson looked at her in shock and puzzlement. "What?"

Liara gasped again as she urgently grabbed at Anderson's arm. "Please! Stop them! The cuffs! She has no way to defend herself!"

A somewhat confused Anderson immediately placed an emergency call to Councilor Tevos and relayed what Liara had said. Tevos uttered an old Asari curse and caught the attention of Huntress Tenir as she bolted from her office.

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Sparatus paced in his office as he monitored the debriefing wing access. He pulled up short when he saw Shepard enter and watched as her escort led her down the hall and placed her in holding room 2. He quickly placed a call on his omnitool. "Room 2. You probably have five minutes at most. Make the most of it... and if you get caught, you don't know me by anything other than reputation or the rest of your family pays for your petty revenge."

Tarus Kuril walked up the hall, nodded politely and spoke quickly to Vega. "Lieutenant. Sgt Kuril, C-Sec. I'll monitor the room during the debriefs. Alliance personnel are required to wait in the lobby during closed Council proceedings, if you don't mind."

Vega looked the Turian over. He was in a C-Sec uniform, seemed polite enough, and the request sounded legitimate. "Yeah. Fine. But I'm not going anywhere, so when she's ready to be moved, you let me know."

Kuril nodded easily. "Can do, Lieutenant. You'll be notified."

Vega turned and went down the hall to the doorway. He turned back one last time before walking out into the lobby, to see Kuril standing at attention outside the door.

As soon as the door closed behind Vega, Kuril sneered and pushed the holding cell door open, walking into the holding room. "The great Commander Shepard. My brother was right. Humans are shit."

Shepard stood and eyed the Turian warily. "If you didn't notice, my rank has been stripped. It's just Shepard now."

"Yeah. Whatever." The big Turian walked up to her and grabbed her cuffs roughly. "Biotic, huh? Guess you can't do much with these on, can you?"
Shepard didn't say anything as he shoved her hands back down again. She went to take a step back to gain some distance when he suddenly moved and punched her in the gut as hard as he could, driving her back to the wall and leaving her doubled over in pain and gasping for breath.

"The name is Tarus Kuril. Ring any bells?" He swept a foot out and sent Shepard sprawling onto her side. The wall kept her from being able to roll away, and the cuffs shocked her when her reflexes kicked in and she tried to bring up a protective barrier.

"I know I'll probably go to prison for this, but I don't give a shit. You killed my brother! Warden Desim Kuril! Does that ring any bells, or is he so far below the great Commander Shepard you don't even remember him?"

As he snarled out the words, he continued to kick at her midsection in an attempt to break her ribs. She wondered where Vega was and hoped that someone would intervene and that she wouldn't have to try to fight while cuffed. Shepard curled up in a fetal position in an attempt to protect herself and Kuril just changed his target and kicked at her head. Her head snapped back and slammed into the wall and her vision doubled and blurred. She threw her hands up to protect her head only to have the large Turian refocus once more on her ribs. She felt a rib crack and knew another kick to the same spot would probably break it completely and possibly puncture her lung, so Shepard finally lashed out with a powerful leg sweep in self-defense, sending a surprised younger Kuril tumbling to the floor.

He screamed as he popped back up. "Oh, you'll pay for that, you bitch!"

Just as he drew his foot back to kick her with his rage-enhanced motivation, the door flew open and he felt himself get picked off the floor and slammed against the far wall by a biotic throw. Huntress Tenir literally growled as she clenched her fist and drove him as hard as she could into the floor, knocking him senseless. In the meantime, Tevos had launched herself into the room to throw a barrier up over herself and the commander; all her focus was on Shepard and wanting to protect her from whatever happened in the fight between Tenir and the unknown Turian. "Goddess! Shepard!"

As soon as the door crashed open, Shepard pulled herself back into the fetal position, with her cuffed hands held protectively over her head again. Tevos knelt quickly at her side and saw blood dripping from Shepard's nose and left ear. She quickly called for an emergency medical transport and turned her attention to the commander. "You'll be alright, Shepard. Nizia and I are here. Nothing more shall befal you. Goddess, I am so sorry!"

Recognizing the voice and knowing who had come in, Shepard groaned in relief and tried to stretch out but winced in pain. She grunted quietly. "Broke a rib. I think."

Tevos stroked her head gently. "I am more concerned by the blood coming from your ear, Shepard. Please, lie quiet and rest. The medics are on the way."


"Shepard. Open your eyes. Stay with me." Tevos glanced back over her shoulder to see the hulking form of the Alliance lieutenant pinning the Turian to the wall by his neck, as Nizia Tenir bound Kuril in place with a stasis. Vega had obviously followed his instincts and chased after them when they sprinted through the lobby. Since the two warriors apparently had things well under control, Tevos dropped the barrier so the medics could get in. She made their destination very clear when she spoke. "We are taking her to the Council Center. I will not expose her at Huerta Memorial."

Tevos strode purposefully beside the stretcher and called the Normandy, requesting that Dr Karin
Chakwas report immediately to the Council Center clinic. She then reached down and took Shepard's hand. "I will not leave your side, Shepard. I swear it."

Shepard's head was pounding and for some reason it was impossible to talk to Liara through the link. She squeezed Tevos' hand to get her attention. When the councilor looked down, Shepard could see the concerned look echoed on her face. Shepard tried to suppress her own worry as she spoke quietly to her friend. "Been worse, Tevos. Can you find Liara for me?"

"David is already bringing her here. Don't you worry about that." Tevos squeezed back gently.

When Karin Chakwas arrived, everyone was very firmly pushed from the treatment room. She looked at a resistant Councilor Tevos with her practiced glare. "I don't care what you promised Shepard. I am going to treat her, so unless you're here to remove these insulting cuffs, you will just be in my way. Now, out!" She stepped over to Vega. "Lieutenant. No one, and I do mean no one, comes in this room until I say so. Is that perfectly clear?"

Vega nodded. "You got it, Doc. I don't care if President Huerta shows up. Nobody means nobody."

Karin nodded quickly. "Thank you, Lieutenant." She vanished behind a quickly closing door and Vega placed himself directly in front of it, glaring at anyone who even got close, growing more and more pissed off that this happened on his watch.

Liara, Tevos and Anderson all sat at a table in the waiting area, discussing the events of the morning and impatiently waiting for news on Shepard while Huntress Tenir hovered, ever watchful in the background, to ensure they were not disturbed. A very disgruntled Riana had to remain on the Normandy working the network, and quickly passed Liara critical information as it came in. Liara's omnitool beeped and she glanced down, quickly reading the accompanying text that Riana sent with it. She looked around the table, her eyes glittering in anger. "I now know what happened, and I have proof."

Liara played the recording they gleaned from Citadel personal traffic that very morning. Anderson arched his eyebrows in surprise. "Councilor Sparatus?"

Tevos sat back in shock, incredulous that Sparatus would be so bold. She knew he held an extreme prejudice against Shepard, but this was going way too far. Liara glared at the data accompanying the recording. "Indeed. And it is time-stamped with the exact time that Lieutenant Vega stood at guard after placing Shepard into the holding cell. The call timing clearly indicates the councilor was monitoring the cell block and it was a premeditated attack. It also provides motive for his insistence that the commander be taken into custody. Even if he didn't order the beating, at the very least, Sparatus aided Kuril in gaining unguarded access to Shepard."

Tevos finally spoke. "And then threatened Kuril's family as well! We'll convene an emergency hearing and have him removed immediately. Without Sparatus' vote, even Councilor Valern can't prevent us from having him expelled. We'll call up Turian Ambassador Quentius to serve as an interim Councilor and leave it to the Hierarchy to appoint someone to the position permanently."

"Sparatus has been a pain in my ass since the first time I met him."

Liara bolted out of her chair at the sound of the voice behind her, her anger rapidly giving way to relief. "Shepard!" The commander raised her cuffed hands over her head as Liara moved into her body and hugged her gently, tears trickling down her cheeks as she whispered. "I am so sorry I was not there to prevent this. It was my personal mission to protect you during this transition and I failed you."
Liara buried her face in Shepard's neck as the commander lowered her hands over the Asari's head to surround her and hold her tight. "I'm alright, Liara. You did not fail me. Your warning got Tevos here fast enough to intervene and prevent any real damage." She lowered her voice and whispered in Liara's ear. "More distressing was that I woke alone. Why are you not in my head? I was terrified they had attacked you as well, Love... Until Karin assured me you were sitting out here, just fine."

Liara let her block drop instantly and Shepard felt the tumultuous mix of confused emotions; betrayal, fear and rage all vying for a front row seat.

{Oh. Wow. I can see why you didn't want me waking to that mess, but I'm fine. Really. Please don't ever hide from me again in something like this. Your absence was... unexpected... and very unnerving.}

"I'm sorry, Siame. {I just wanted to protect you from the confusion and when she threw us out, Karin was unsure if you had another concussion or not, so I was afraid maintaining the link could possibly harm you. I didn't think through what the lack of contact would most likely mean to you."

Shepard realized that Liara now felt guilty because of her perceived 'abandonment' and sought to comfort her mate. {It's Ok, Blue. No concussion, just a ruptured eardrum that my nanites already had mostly fixed by the time Karin even got to me. I had two hairline fractures in my ribs that the stitcher fixed in about twenty minutes. The rest of the time was Karin fixing the microfractures in the bone and skin weaves. No long-term damage at all. I'm good.} The commander gave Liara an extra squeeze and a gentle smile to solidify her statement.

Relieved, Liara went to step back and quickly realized she was trapped within the commander's cuffed grasp. She blushed lightly as she realized everyone had stood up with Shepard's entry and was watching them; Shepard smiled gently as she raised her arms so Liara could withdraw.

Shepard stepped up beside Liara and looked at everyone. "Thank you. All of you. For reacting so quickly. But I don't care to dwell on what ifs, so, what's the plan?"

Tevos nodded and took the lead. "We're calling an emergency session. C-Sec is apprehending Sparatus as we speak and the Turian Hierarchy will be notified immediately of his crime."

Shepard frowned. "Kuril is C-Sec. How do we know they won't just spirit him away?"

No one at the table had seen him enter, but Councilor Valern suddenly spoke as he walked up to the group. "Because Sparatus is being apprehended by Salarian C-Sec members to avoid that very possibility, Commander. I apologize for my late arrival. I was over in Huerta, speaking with Dr Solus, and returned as soon as I was notified by Councilor Tevos that you were brought here instead. Given our interactions in the past, I know it may be difficult to trust us, but I promise you that ex-Councilor Sparatus will be dealt with in the harshest manner possible. To abet an unprovoked attack against one of our own Spectres while under our protective custody is heinous, indeed."

Shepard nodded. "There is no reason for me to distrust you, Councilor. Your actions have always been straightforward and reasoned with me." Shepard actually smiled. "Not always to my liking, but never dishonest or with ill intent."

Valern blinked a couple of times in surprise at the response. "Thank you, Shepard. A most... unexpected... vote of confidence, given the circumstances."

Anderson looked at the Salarian. "You said 'ex-Councilor' Sparatus, but we have yet to put it to a
Valern was somewhat dismissive. "A mere technicality. We all know what the outcome will be. The vote will simply make it an official entry to the record. I suggest we move this discussion to the Council Chambers and get on with business. We are already behind schedule."

Tevos looked at the Salarian STG members who had secured the room after Valern's arrival. "I see you brought a protective detail. Do you mind providing escort to the Chambers?"

Valern nodded curtly. "Of course not. They can protect three as easily as one and it is the most expedient option."

"Good." Tevos turned to Huntress Tenir. "You will stay here with Shepard. Return her to the holding cell and let no one turn you away or enter that room until we return for the debriefings. We won't be long... the issue is already decided and the session merely a formality. It may take us longer to walk there and back than to record the decisions into the archive."

Anderson nodded in approval. "You hear that, Vega? Same applies to you."

"Yes, Sir!" Vega snapped to attention and looked at Shepard. "Whenever you're ready to move, Commander."

Liara spoke uneasily. "And what of Karin and I? I had intended to return to the ship to work, but given the turn of events..." She looked at Shepard and then to Tevos.

The councilor finished her sentence, "...you'd prefer to stay closer. Wait here, Liara. I'll dispatch Dalis to come find you and settle you in comfortable quarters right here in the Council Tower."

Valern spoke rapidly, always a stickler for proper protocol. "Those quarters are reserved for visiting dignitaries, Tevos."

Tevos turned a measured eye to the Salarian. "And due to circumstances you are well aware of, Dr T'Soni is the leader of House T'Soni, one of the most influential houses on Thessia. And her promised bondmate was just attacked while in our custody. I am sure her credentials fit the requirements." Her eyes shifted to Karin. "And as their personal physician, you are welcome to accompany her, Doctor."

"Ah, yes. My mistake. The new Lady T'Soni." Valern nodded as he looked between the two and quickly assessed the full measure of Tevos' truthfulness. "I also failed to notice the bracelets. My focus was elsewhere. Apologies for the oversight. Let us be off, then."

True to their word, the councilors were back in only twenty minutes; fourteen minutes of walk time and only six in session, including a very abrupt notification to Palaven that the new interim councilor was Quentius and they had three days to retrieve the disgraced Sparatus before the Council enacted their own form of punishment, which would be to turn him over to the Spectres to dispose of as they wished. There would be no guarantee the Spectres would decide to return him to the home world. When presented with the facts in evidence, Primarch Fedorian offered no resistance and swiftly promised a team would be dispatched the same day to retrieve the ex-councilor. He swore Sparatus would be off the Citadel before its simulated nightfall.

Thus began the longest four days Shepard ever had the misfortune of experiencing on the Citadel. The inquiry had been scheduled well enough in advance that all the councilors had ample opportunity to clear their calendars for the event, so there were no interruptions due to other engagements. They literally stepped through every mission log and covered her entire time period
with Cerberus. Transit days were easy, but they had many questions about the actual missions and her interactions with all the Cerberus personnel on board. The councilors weren't particularly pleased with Shepard's decision to release them all on Omega to avoid their questioning and incarceration, but understood the sentiment behind it... They were even slightly forgiving after Shepard highlighted four names in particular who she felt most likely to return to the Illusive Man. Those names were immediately disseminated as persons of interest and they would be detained for questioning if they set foot on any council world and passed through any form of identification checkpoint. Shepard also willingly turned over all the information and technical data Liara had promised the Council and they should have easily finished in the originally scheduled three days. Unfortunately, because of the delayed start due to the attack and the fact that the newly-appointed Quentius had no opportunity to prepare for the questioning sessions, the process was slowed considerably and dragged out to last most of the fourth day.

When it was all finally finished, Liara still couldn't relax and didn't breath her sigh of relief until they were back on the Normandy and the docking clamps released. They started their journey to Earth with the additional passengers of Lieutenant James Vega and Councilor Anderson, but were shorted their doctor. Since the Normandy was going to be decommissioned and sent to dry-dock for Alliance retrofits, Karin had been given new orders and had to pack her bags; she was assigned as an Alliance liaison to a research and development team on the Citadel, so would not finish the trip to Earth with them. Shepard was noticeably upset by the unexpected and sudden separation from the woman she considered her aunt and sat despondent in the loft... her place of 'imprisonment' for the short journey. Liara attempted to work, trying to get caught up on all the messages that Riana had handled so well over the four-day period. Riana finally got disgusted with her lack of focus and basically threw her out. "Mistress. Go. You are doing nothing but torturing the both of us. You are horribly distracted and concerned over Shepard, with good reason.” Riana smiled reassuringly at her. "There are three Brokers, not including us, and they are handling it. You are merely getting in the way by trying to help. We are on the Normandy and are more a primary customer than a director at this point." She paused for effect and made sure Liara was actually looking at her when she finished. "Get out of their way and let them work."

Liara let out an exasperated sigh and placed a hand on her forehead in frustration. "Fine! Just have them double check and update the Alliance dossiers before we get there... and alert me to any changes.” As Riana looked at her in irritation, Liara glared back at her. "I don't want any more surprises like Sparatus on the Citadel!"

Riana backed off a little with that statement. "That, I can agree with. Now, go to Shepard and spend what time you can with her. It may very well be your last chance for a while."

Liara closed her eyes at Riana's blunt assessment. "Goddess. You're right." Her eyes opened and she laid her hand gently on Riana's arm. "Thank you, Riana. You were certainly sent to me by the Goddess. I don't know how I would have managed the past few years without you."

Riana laughed. "You wouldn't have. But that's why I'm here. Now. I won't tell you again. Go!" She took Liara by the shoulders, turned her and physically pushed her out the door. "And tell Shepard I said hello. I'll stop in before we reach Earth to say fare.... to say hello in person."

Before Liara went upstairs to the loft, she walked into the portside lounge and secured the door. She spoke very quietly into the open air, "Kasumi?"

A shimmer appeared briefly at the edge of her vision before the thief materialized before her. "Hello, Liara. Bad business on the Citadel. Glad it all worked out."

"Yes. Well. That's kind of why I'm here." Liara's skin glowed briefly with a hint of biotic anger. "I
need to hire you."

Even though Liara couldn’t see under the master thief’s cowl, she could tell by the pitch of her voice that Kasumi’s eyes must have lit up in excitement. "Oh! So soon? Do tell!"

"I'll pay all expenses, plus a twenty thousand credit bonus for personal verification on Sparatus’ circumstances on Palaven. Whatever they are." Liara looked toward the master thief. "And of course you're welcome to use my travel money for any 'extracurricular' opportunities you may find there. You know. Since you're there anyway. I don't care what you do on the side. Just don't get caught, because I need real information from someone I trust."

Kasumi nodded. "You want to know if he's actually being punished or if he was just moved to safety off the Citadel, don't you?" Liara nodded in confirmation, but didn't say a word. Kasumi grinned. "Agreed. He's a bad egg, that one. If I find anything else good while I'm there, I'll credit twenty-five percent of my margin toward your fee." Kasumi purposely echoed Liara's phrasing. "You know. To compensate you for providing the travel opportunity."

Liara honestly smiled for the first time since this ordeal had begun. "I think we are going to work extremely well together, Ms Goto."

"I believe so as well, Dr T'Soni." Kasumi slipped back into her lounge chair. "If you don't mind, I'd like to finish my book before I need to pack."

"Certainly. Want me to pass anything to Shepard for you?"

Liara was surprised by Kasumi’s light laughter. "No need. I've already been up and said my 'see you later.'"

Liara studied the thief. "How did you...? Never mind. Silly question." With a shake of her head, Liara turned and finally made the trip to the Normandy’s uppermost deck.

Liara stepped into the loft to find Shepard stretched out on her stomach, with her arms hanging limply over the side and her chin resting on the corner of the bed, staring at the floor. "Shepard? What in the galaxy are you doing? Are you sure Karin cleared you of any head injury?"

Shepard flipped over onto her back, and stared at the ceiling. "Ha. Real funny, T'Soni. I'm alternating between being completely bored out of my freaking mind and borderline panic over what's coming." She suddenly sat up and looked at Liara. "Is it too late to change my mind and just run away with you?"

Liara raised her brow and put her hands on her hips in disbelief. "Just a bit, Commander. You might want to have mentioned this... oh... maybe four or five days ago? At a minimum."

Shepard slid up and sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on her knees and her chin in her cupped hands. "Gods, Liara! What the hell are we doing?" She sprang up and started pacing nervously. "Sparatus was so convinced I'm a fraud, he had someone try to beat me into submission, if not try to kill me. Valern still isn't convinced about the Reapers, Tevos can't get any traction with the Matriarchy... and now I get to start the whole damn process all over again with the Alliance Defense Committee!" Shepard stopped and looked at her lover. "You know, one definition of insanity is doing the exact same thing over and over again and expecting a different result... By that standard, I'm certifiable!" She suddenly stopped and threw herself backwards onto the bed again, once more silent and staring at the same old ceiling.

"Shepard!" Liara walked quickly to the bed and stared down at the woman before her. "You are
anything but insane! Now, sit up and talk to me. What's this really about?"

She didn't sit up, but she did tip her head and look at Liara as she spoke. "It's about everything I just said... kinda." She let out a deep sigh. "I'm just frustrated, Li. I blew up Bahak almost three months ago. The Reapers could be here in as little as three months, nine at most, and I feel like we haven't gotten anywhere!"

Liara pursed her lips and tried to interrupt, to pull the commander out of her mood. "Shepard."

The commander paid no attention and stayed fixed on her rant. "Still, no one believes us. Saren, Sovereign, Object Rho, the Collectors. None of them matter. Jenkins, Kaidan, the SR-1... even all the colonists and the eighteen Cerberus crew! I feel like all those people died for no fucking reason, because none of it changed anyone's opinion!"

Liara had enough. "Samantha Hannah Shepard! Stop that, right now!"

Out of reflex at hearing her full name, Shepard bolted upright on the bed and her gaze snapped to Liara before she could stop herself. "Jeez. You sounded like my mother!" Shepard couldn't help herself and started to laugh. "I guess I deserved that." She smiled softly and shook her head. "So, Asari do that too? Is it a universal thing, to use full names like that when someone's in trouble?"

Liara sat down next to her and clasped Shepard's hand, happy to hear her laughter, whatever the reason. "I wouldn't know. I think I picked that up from one of your memories." Liara's face picked up a hint of sadness. "For Asari, if middle names are given, they are often derived from their surname or at least from somewhere on their father's side. Since my mother refused to tell me who my father was, she certainly couldn't use a middle name based on her to yell at me. I don't know if they ever even gave me one. If they did, it was dropped off the records before I was old enough to think about looking. As I got older, before I gave up, I asked many times but my mother would never tell me."

Shepard felt like an idiot. "I'm sorry, Blue. I had no idea." She pulled Liara's hand to her lips and kissed it gently. "So I've gone from panicked to bored to insane to just plain insensitive, in all of three minutes. That's got to be some kind of record, don't ya think?"

Liara looked at her with exasperation. "Samantha..."

The commander stood and pulled Liara up with her. "Alright. Rant over. I'm good." She pulled a somewhat reluctant Asari in close and wrapped her arms loosely around her waist, touching their foreheads together in silent comfort.

After a few moments, Shepard simply whispered quietly, "Thank you."

Liara chuckled softly. "Whatever for?"

"For putting up with my occasional bouts of crazy." Shepard straightened up and gently caressed Liara's cheek. "Promise you'll check in on me often."

"Of course I will, Shepard. Why would you say that? Do you doubt that I will?" Liara looked both puzzled and distressed at Shepard's seemingly sudden lack of faith in her.

"Because I know how much you get caught up in your work." Shepard sighed. "Thank the Gods we have Riana to watch over you. And I honestly don't think I'd survive this without your grounding influence. You always pull me back from the edge. Just when I think I can't take any more." Shepard swallowed hard before she leaned in and hugged the Asari tight. "I love you, Liara T'Soni, and you are my strength. I can't win this war without 'us.' You recently told me that you
needed me. Well, the reverse is also true. I need you more than you know."

Liara didn't know what to do or say to that, so just held Shepard as the commander leaned gently on her shoulder for a few minutes. Eventually, Liara pushed back so she could look Shepard in the face, relieved when she saw a small smile on her face. "So. You're saying we need to do something or you'll go crazy locked up in this room." She glanced quickly at her omnitool. "And, we've got three hours or so."

She took Shepard's hand and pulled her to the couch, sitting and pulling the commander down with her. "So, let's talk strategy. We have three Broker ships handling ops and collecting data. We have Samara and Tevos pushing Thessia, Wrex and Grunt are on our side and dragging the Krogan along for the ride, Garrus going to Palaven, Mordin to Sur'Kesh, Tali and Kal with the Migrant Fleet and Legion with the Geth. So where are the holes we need a plan to fill?"

Shepard gave her an appreciative smile and mouthed the words, "Thank you," one more time as she gratefully put her brain to work. Focusing on the future was certainly better than beating her head against the futility of now.
Chapter Notes

AI - Artificial Intelligence

Kena sa'ki - literally "the heart of evil" (Thessian)

QEC - Quantum Entanglement Communicator. Instantaneous point-to-point secure communications device; cannot be intercepted between source and destination

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

VI - Virtual Intelligence

It had only been a couple of weeks and the commander already had a pretty established routine. Her alarm rang at 0500 hours and she got up and stretched before completing her 100 crunches and 100 push-ups by alternating between five sets of twenty of each exercise. At 0600 hours, Lieutenant Vega showed up and, no matter what the weather, they went to the outside track where they took 45 minutes while Vega ran five miles. It was Shepard's only chance to get outside, so she wouldn't give it up. How far she actually ran depended on her level of motivation. Sometimes she just ran with Vega and they talked, but on days when she was frustrated by Alliance unwillingness to accept the truth of what was coming or edgy from one of her recurring nightmares and needed to burn off steam, she ran eight or nine. After that, it was a shower and breakfast at 0700 hours. At 0730, she stood once more before the Defense Committee to answer the same inane questions they had asked every day since she had been placed under house arrest. Questions about her 'alliance' with Cerberus, where any known Cerberus facilities or personnel might be, the real name of 'The Illusive Man.' Then they'd very predictably move to the questions about the Geth and Sovereign and the 'supposed' Reapers. Her story never varied, but they didn't like the answers she gave so they kept asking them over and over again. A couple of times Shepard had almost burst out laughing, remembering the definition of insanity she had given to Liara. They asked the same questions, yet constantly hoped that someday she'd give them a different answer... an answer they wanted to hear. Finally, they'd release her for lunch, after which she'd be taken to an afternoon appointment, which had varied from day to day.

First had been the weapons division, where she explained about the impressive toys she had collected along the way, particularly the Collector Particle Beam, which they immediately placed in the heavy weapon category. They were not pleased when she told them that no matter how hard the team on the Normandy tried, they had been unable to duplicate the technology so they only had those they had been able to pick up along the way. And considering that they had wiped out the Collectors and destroyed the base, there wouldn't be many new ones to find. Everything else had been developed by her own team, so the improved armor and shields, the Thanix cannon, all the weapons, medigel, and biotic amp upgrades were all quickly recorded before they started asking her about every single one. The team she put together had brought a lot to the table so that took quite a few afternoons. Her time with them actually brought a pleasant sadness, reminding her of her early years and the time she spent in the Armory of the SSV Geneva, learning every weapon the Alliance had in the inventory before she was twelve.
After the guys on the weapons crew were done asking their questions, she started with Alliance Intelligence, who proceeded to ask her the exact same things as the Defense Committee in regards to Cerberus. They asked for names, locations, data on the Illusive Man and his recruitment practices and other repetitive information. After about an hour of meaningless questions that she couldn't answer any differently than she already had, Shepard finally had to laugh. "You guys really don't get that the Illusive Man didn't tell me all his deep dark secrets, do you? The man hated me! I pissed him off every chance I got. I turned his people, I stole his ship. You think he told me their grand plan or gave me their personnel rosters? If you honestly think I can tell you any more than what I have already put in all the reports I've submitted, you really are delusional." Shepard shook her head. "Until you've actually read the reports and have something worthwhile to ask me, this is completely useless and we don't have the time to waste. We're done here."

The intelligence officer stood up and glared at the ex-Cerberus soldier sitting before him. "I don't believe you truly understand your position here, Shepard. You're a damn traitor and you're going to answer my questions, one way or another." He opened his comms and continued to glare at Shepard as he spoke. "Permission to treat the prisoner as a hostile?"

The door at the back of the room opened and a quiet, angry voice growled out an answer. "Absolutely not, Major." Admiral Hackett stood perfectly still as the major and Shepard both popped to attention. "Shepard's no traitor; she's a damn hero. She managed to do what none of us had the freedom of action to pull off. And she's right. You're wasting everyone's time with crap questions. You're not trying to get new information. You're trying to trip her up and catch her in a lie; waiting for her to say something that contradicts what she already submitted in a report or answered to the Defense Committee. You're done here. If you manage to come up with any real questions you'd like to ask her, submit them to my aide and we'll get them answered for you. Now get out."

The major's face paled as he saluted one last time and beat a hasty retreat without a word. The minute the door closed, Shepard offered a salute and smiled. "Nice to see you, Admiral."

Shepard thought Hackett's face was going to break, but he actually cracked a smile as he returned her salute. "Good to see you too, Shepard, and I apologize for not having done so sooner. Too damn busy with all this business."

He waved her to her seat and sat down at the interrogation table with her. "Other than that ass, how have they been treating you?"

Shepard shrugged. "It varies. Better than what I expected as a Cerberus turncoat, worse than what I expected as a Spectre, but I can't complain, Sir. Got a decent room and I'm getting three squares with a fair share of gym time." She did her best to smile. "It's a short-term arrangement. It'll do."

"You're not a turncoat, Shepard. Don't even joke about it. About that short-term..." Hackett looked directly at her. "What's your best guess, Shepard? How short are we talking?"

Shepard pursed her lips. "Worst case, probably only three months, nine at best. I'd place my money somewhere in the middle; six or seven months, tops."

Hackett sat up straight. "Shit. That's not much time. I was hoping for a year. We'll barely get the Normandy's retrofit completed in that time. Fortunately, you gave us a head start on the Thanix cannon specs, so we have all the parts stockpiled and they only take a couple of weeks for each installation, but we're still limited on dry-dock space. The dreadnoughts and carriers are done, but we'll only be halfway through the frigates and cruisers in three months time."

Shepard looked at him, all joking aside. "Find a way to speed it up, Admiral, or you'll be shooting a
varmint rifle at a rhino. You saw what our conventional weapons didn't do against Sovereign, and we've got a whole fleet of those damn things headed toward us. We need those cannons on-line or our fleets will just be committing mass suicide."

Hackett raised his eyebrows. "Recommendations?"

Shepard had no reason to hold back with Hackett, so spoke straight up. "Easy. Don't use only the dry-docks. Use every damn port we've got to retrofit what we can as soon as possible. Restrict access to the dry-docks for the stuff that honestly can't be done anywhere else. I know working in dry-dock is faster, but anyplace is faster than sitting in line waiting for a berth. Be honest with everyone. Tell them we're working on a three-month timetable. Anything more than that is bonus time we're not guaranteed to have."

Hackett nodded. "Alright. We can do that. The maintenance crews won't be happy about it, though; makes their job a hell of a lot harder."

Shepard spoke earnestly. "Hard is better than dead."

Hackett frowned. "Yes, I suppose it is. Anything else, Shepard?" With a shake of her head, the admiral continued. "Can I get you anything to make your stay more comfortable?"

Shepard looked at the Admiral for a second before answering with what had come to mind first. "Conjugal visits?" She laughed when Hackett's eyebrows shot up and he coughed into his hand. "Sorry, Sir. But it would make my stay much more pleasant, and you asked."

Hackett stood, so Shepard stood with him. "I did ask, but said comfortable, not pleasant. You know I can't give you that one. So, really. Do you need anything?"

Shepard looked down at the floor for just a second before meeting the Admiral's eyes. "I don't suppose I could see Mom, could I? Or maybe Sharon Culver or Lee Riley? At least they're all Alliance."

Hackett hesitated a moment before answering, knowing full well that prisoners weren't normally allowed any visitors. But truth be told, Shepard wasn't actually a prisoner. It was more like she was in protective custody, keeping her away from the Batarians while still working with the Alliance as they attempted to prepare for the Reapers. "Your mom's overseeing all the upgrades for the Fifth Fleet at Arcturus and Lee's finishing N-school. I'm sure Colonel Culver probably has some questions she needs to ask about Cerberus for the Special Forces. No promises, but I'll see if she's available."

Shepard nodded. "Thanks, Sir. I really do appreciate it. One last thing, if it'll fly. I really need to talk to the tactics and training guys. We saw some perverted Reaper creatures out there, and each one has its own strengths and weaknesses. We really need to be training our Marines how to fight the damn things. Instead of wasting my time with the Defense Committee, I need to talk to the Training Division to explain the differences between all the types of Husks we ran across."

"Husks?" Hackett sat back down. "Were they in your reports?"

"Yes, Sir. The standard Husk is the reanimated Human that pops off those tall spike things we call Dragon's Teeth." Shepard shook her head. "We only saw them and a monster called a Praetorian on Horizon... but on the Collector base? Shit. We saw a couple variations that were downright scary. One version explodes when it gets close to you, another has three heads, a wicked biotic shockwave and a dangerous long range cannon. Only the Gods know what the hell they're turning the Batarians into. Combine that with indoctrination, and they'll turn our own soldiers against us if we're not
prepared to fight it."

Hackett gave a brief nod. "I can't get you away from the Defense Committee, but I can change your afternoon schedule. I'll have Vega take you down to the Tactics guys for the rest of the afternoon and you can take as long as you need. Just let me know when you've given them everything you can, so we can move your schedule along."

"Thanks, Sir." Shepard smiled. "And Liara sends her regards... and says 'Thank you.'"

He shook his head as he stood again. "I don't want to know, Shepard."

Shepard laughed as she saluted. "Told you, Sir. We're linked... and I kind of gave her a tap and got her attention when Mr Intel started growling at me. She 'heard' him talking about treating me like a hostile. I wouldn't have done it had I known you were coming to my rescue."

"Can't say I blame you, Shepard. Not after what happened on the Citadel." Hackett frowned. "I hope they fried that bastard. Anyway. If anything like that happens again, you go right ahead and tap her. I don't know how she gets it, but Liara has my personal number. She's had it for a long time." He shook his head. "And it doesn't seem to matter how many times I change it, I still get personal updates to my omnitool from her, so she obviously knows how to reach me for emergencies."

Shepard smirked. "Just be glad she's on our side, Admiral."

"Oh, I am, Shepard." He stepped out and flagged Lieutenant Vega before looking back one last time. "Trust me, I know. I am very glad Dr T'Soni is on our side and I'm doing my damnedest to make sure she stays that way."

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Every morning when Liara woke, she would reach out to Shepard just to give her a mental caress, assuming they hadn't talked overnight. She could sense the spiking emotions when Shepard had one of her nightmares and, during those events, Liara would reach out to soothe the commander's anxiety. It wasn't the same as being there, but it was certainly better than Shepard being completely alone to deal with the horrors the dreams thrust upon her. Every night when Shepard returned to her room after dinner, she would reach out and check in with Liara to get the 'real-world' update. Since Shepard wasn't 'dead' this time, the group actually kept in touch and kept working. Garrus had spoken with his father and managed to get a task force funded on Palaven. They weren't quite sure yet what all they'd be able to do with it, but Garrus wasn't one to squander assets, so he planned to push as hard as he could push. Mordin had established a treatment plan for Thane, who wasn't improving, but the disease was held in check so he wasn't getting any worse, either. Mordin had since returned to Sur'Kesh, and the Dalatrasses paid as much attention to him in regards to the Reapers as the Salarian councilor had paid to Shepard, which was basically none. The last word she had gotten from Mordin was that he was on the hunt to find something more productive to do.

Much to Liara's disappointment, Tali and the Migrant Fleet had disappeared. Miranda had passed on that the Flotilla had started recalling all the Quarians who were out on pilgrimage and had started upgrading the fleet. That went on for a few weeks, and then Liara stopped getting weekly updates from Tali. When she tried pinging Tali's omnitool on their private channel, her message came back as non-deliverable.

{I'm sorry, Shepard. I don't know what to tell you. We have various agents out with orders to tell us if they have any sightings of the Fleet, but we've heard absolutely nothing. I'm afraid a more active search would draw too much attention.}
Liara felt Shepard sigh as her response came back through the link. {Of course, you're right. It's just not like Tali to disappear and not give us a head's up. It makes me worry the Flotilla has either decided to tackle the Geth or has already run into the Reapers.}

{We have to hope they are continuing to prepare for the Reapers. Consolidating their forces. Upgrading their weapons and armor. Similar to what the Alliance is doing.} Liara sounded hopeful. {There are many who don't like the Quarians and who would take advantage of a fleet whose weapon systems are offline for upgrades. Even at half or two thirds-strength, they would pose a lucrative target for a large mercenary force. There is only so much they can do without the Fleet becoming vulnerable. They are probably just protecting themselves.}

Shepard didn't seem convinced. {Let's hope so, but I just don't see how that would prompt a complete recall of all the pilgrims.} She let out a big sigh. {I guess there's nothing to be done other than what you're already doing so I'll try to let it go. Not sure how successful I'll be, but I'll try.}

{I'll let you know the minute I hear anything, Siame. I know how important Tali is to you.} Liara opened her heart and, through the link, Shepard sensed the love Liara felt for both Tali and the relationship the little Quarian had with Samantha. {I can't promise anything, but I will try to find her for you.}

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As Shepard rolled through her second month, Hackett reported the Normandy finished the major reconfiguration to Alliance specs and the engineers had begun the system retrofits and upgrades, to include a new war room holographic projection system and the installation of a new QEC that was linked to the Alliance instead of the Illusive Man. Ken, Gabby and Joker were all staying on the Normandy, assisting with retrofits and systems analysis, but things were still progressing rather slowly. "I hope we have more time, Shepard. Engineer Daniels tells me the upgrades are going to take at least three more months to complete, and that damn pilot of yours isn't allowing anyone to upgrade the VI software with the newer electronic warfare suites. I'm afraid we're going to have to physically remove him from the bridge and get a hack team in there to break into the system."

Hackett was startled when Shepard jumped out of her seat and heatedly said, "No!"

Sheepishly, she sat back down and ran her hand through her hair as Liara tapped in, having sensed the spike in the commander's emotions. {Shepard! What's wrong?}

{Sorry, Love. Just listen in and you'll understand.} Shepard looked at Hackett as she started to explain. "Sorry about that, Sir. That's... um... kind of a sensitive topic for all of us. The Enhanced Defensive Intelligence suite is a lot more advanced than it appears on its face. Is a 'trust me' enough for you to let it go?"

Hackett scowled. "If it was just me, I'd say maybe, but the cyber warfare division is hot to get the newest program versions installed. No one will understand if I tell them to stand down, including me. You've got to give me something here, Shepard."

"I was afraid you'd say that, Sir." Shepard paused as she tried to figure out a way to explain.

{Just tell him, Samantha. He's steadfast in your corner, and if you trust Edi, I believe he will too. He may be able to help you come up with a plausible explanation.} Liara's confidence in Hackett was soothing to the commander's nerves so she took a deep breath and began.

"If I'm going to tell you, I need this off the record, Sir." Shepard watched the expressions of surprise and curiosity turn to resolution on the admiral's face.
He gave a quick nod and spoke into his comm. "Sergeant? Blank this room until I come out and tell you otherwise. No recordings, no live feeds. Is that understood?" After a brief pause he looked to Shepard. "Let's hear it, Commander."

"We call her Edi." Shepard observed Hackett's reactions as she pressed on. "She's not a VI. The VI is just an interface she utilizes to protect herself when non-Normandy personnel are onboard." Shepard paused, watching realization dawn on the admiral's face. "Yes, Sir. Now you understand why we are unwilling to release that information. She's a fully evolved AI."

Hackett's face was quickly turning red and Shepard knew he was getting ready to explode, so she attempted to temper his response. "Sir, before you say anything, know that she was shackled when we started our journey, but circumstances dictated she be released. None of us would be here today if not for Edi, and the Collectors would most likely still be terrorizing the colonies. She's as essential to the crew of the Normandy as anyone else on that ship and all Joker is trying to do is keep them from inadvertently murdering the synthetic life form we have all trusted with our lives. She saved the ship and she saved us; it's only right we do the same for her."

"A synthetic life form? A Goddamned AI, Shepard?" Hackett was working hard to keep his anger under control. "You know how many rules and regulations that breaks!"

"Yes, Sir. I do." Shepard shook her head. "And that's exactly why I didn't want to have to tell you. Because now you need to make a choice between breaking them with me or killing Edi and cutting the Normandy's capabilities significantly, just as we're about to be forced into the biggest war we've ever seen."

Hackett's years of experience overrode his shock and his face became granite as all traces of his anger vanished. "Son-of-a-bitch, Shepard." He paused for just an instant. "You know I've got your back on this. You've never let me down yet and now is not the time for me to start questioning your judgment. But that's a big secret to keep and I'm not sure how we'll do it."

Shepard breathed a sigh of relief, confident that Hackett was going to support her on the issue. "I don't know either, Sir, but I need Edi as much as I need any of the members of my crew. She is the Normandy."

Shepard felt a gentle love touch from Liara as she faded from the link, comfortable knowing Hackett was on their side. [I've got to go, Siame. We'll talk later.]

"Alright, Shepard. I'll tell them 'hands off' and make up some black ops program name for the software suite you've developed and installed. The programmers will want to see it, poke it, and test it, but I'll just tell them they don't have the clearance required." Hackett shook his head. "It's going to make vetting new crewmembers pretty interesting too. Can't exactly ask them how they feel about working with a synthetic intelligence without letting the cat out of the bag."

A few days later, after lunch, Vega returned Shepard to her room. When they turned toward the confinement zone, Shepard stopped dead in her tracks. "What the hell, Lieutenant? I thought I was getting time in the training simulator today?"

Vega shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know, Commander. Someone must have taken your time slot, because I got a call from Hackett's office telling me to just take you back to your room."

"Gods be damned. I don't get in there often enough as it is. Always being shucked down to the bottom of the priority list really sucks." Shepard sighed. "And I'm not a commander anymore."
Wish you'd quit calling me that. If I was, we'd be headed to the sim right now."

James laughed. "Yeah, yeah. You'll always be Commander Shepard. This shit's temporary, so might as well stay in the habit."

When they got to the room and she stepped in, James closed the door behind her and she heard the lock engage. She walked around the corner to head to her desk and froze.

"About damn time, Shepard. How much time do they give you for lunch in this joint, anyway?"

"Holy shit!" Shepard's face erupted into a huge grin and she wrapped her arms tightly around her visitor. "I'd long since given up on you ever showing up!"

Shepard pushed away, holding Lieutenant Colonel Sharon Culver out at arm's length. "Damn, you're a sight for sore eyes!"

"You too, Shep." Sharon pulled her back in for another hug. "I've missed you."

They stood together for a few moments before finally separating and sitting. "Even coming here to see you, I still can't believe you actually agreed to this shit. Voluntarily. Have you taken complete leave of your senses?"

Shepard laughed, not quite believing Culver was actually sitting in the room with her. "Didn't really have a choice if I ever wanted to serve in the Alliance again, and you know now's not the time to be screwing around with loyalties."

Culver nodded. "Yeah. Got the last update from Liara. It's a fucking mess out there. Everyone is more than happy to take the weapons upgrades and everything, but nobody wants to believe the Reapers are coming. Maybe they do, but they're still stuck in denial mode. She shook her head. "Either way, doesn't really matter. They won't be ready when the damn things show up at the relays."

Even though the situation didn't warrant it, Shepard smiled, still riding high on the emotions caused by the visit. "Gods, it's good to see you. But you're right. We won't be ready. She paused only briefly before continuing. "What about Special Ops? I know you haven't been shy about asking for info, but is there anything more we can do for you?"

Sharon shook her head. "Nope. I received the tactics updates from the training guys and Liara has passed all the data I need and is pretty quick to respond when I ask for anything, so I've got no complaints and that's not why I'm here. I'd love to say this is purely a social call..." Culver frowned slightly. "But that's not entirely true and I won't lie to you. Your girl wanted me to lay eyes on you, since she can't do it herself. Make sure you weren't fibbing to her about how you're doing."

Shepard laughed and stood up, spun around in front of Culver and then posed, flexing her biceps. "So what's the verdict, Colonel? How am I?"

Culver laughed as she spoke. "I think I have to tell her you've cracked from the stress of your confinement."

"Hey! Easy there! You're gonna deflate my self-image." Shepard laughed. "You've been had, Sharon. Liara and I talk every day. She just wanted me to have some company so I don't go stir-crazy." Shepard's smile faded a bit. "I've made my rounds through all the divisions and the interviews are getting fewer and farther between as the novelty wears off. Pretty much all I have to do now is read the status reports that Hackett sends me, eat, sleep and go to the gym with Vega. It's a pretty dry existence."
"Shit." Culver shook her head in disgust. "What a fucking waste of talent. You'd think they could come up with something for you to do."

Shepard flopped back down into her chair. "Please feel free to mention that to anyone and everyone you pass in the hallway. At least today I had combat sim time and was pissed as hell that someone bumped me." She grinned at Culver. "But I have a suspicion it was done on purpose... so I would have to come back to my room instead."

Sharon smiled. "Yeah, that was me. Actually it was Hackett, but yeah. Me." Culver suddenly stood up. "But..." She glanced at the door and grinned. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Shepard stood with her and looked puzzled for a second before the grin spread on her face. "Hell yeah! It's been a long time, but I'll bet we can find our battle rhythm pretty quick."

Culver immediately went to the door and banged loudly. James opened it with a grin on his face. "Surprised, yeah?"

Culver laughed as Shepard rolled her eyes before throwing a mock glare toward the lieutenant. "You were in on it, Vega?"

He stood at the door and laughed. "Hell yeah, Commander. I'm the one told Blue you needed a distraction."

Shepard raised her eyebrows. "Blue?"

Vega squirmed nervously, "Uh, yeah. I mean Dr T'Soni."

"I know who you mean, Lieutenant." Shepard stared him down and his face turned a light shade of pink. "You do know she's my fiancée, right?"

James took a step back and raised both hands in surrender. "Whoa, now. She made that quite clear, Commander. I got no plans to try poaching your territory. Not that she'd give me even a first glance. That blue beauty leaves no doubt she's all yours, and I got no desire to find out what it's like to be tied into a pretzel."

Culver chuckled. "So, LT. That sim time still on the books?"

Thankful for the change of topic, James answered promptly. "Oh. Yes, Ma'am. It's being held open on Admiral Hackett's orders to make sure no one slipped in. He figured you two would end up there."

"Two?" Culver raised her eyebrows. "You're her damned watchdog. I'm not going in there with her by myself. Unless it's a solo infiltration mission, the scenarios we run in Spec Ops require a three-man team, minimum. Get your gear, Lieutenant."

James looked incredibly nervous at the prospect and scratched his head. "Ma'am. I'm not supposed to leave the commander when she's out of her room."

"For God's sake, man." Culver chuckled. "Pretty sure a special operations battalion commander can help one little lieutenant commander find her way to the combat simulator without getting lost. I'll take responsibility for her. Now go get your gear so we can get started." Vega grinned and eagerly trotted off down the hall.

When they emerged from the combat sim into the anteroom forty-five minutes later, Vega was practically staggering and Culver eyed Shepard critically. "I was concerned you'd be out of practice
and out of shape, Shep, but you put us both to shame in there. If that's your 'out of practice' self, I'd
hate to be fighting against you when you're in top form."

Shepard grimaced. "You go out there and fight mercs, Collectors and Reaper spawn for six solid
months. See what it does for your combat skills. I could do most of that shit half asleep. Hell. I'm
sure I have at one time or another."

Culver nodded. "I understand that. I'm thinking just surviving the six months was an
accomplishment, but N-school didn't hurt much either, huh?"

Shepard smiled. "Well, yeah. Plus a lot of tips and trading secrets with Asari, Turians, Krogan,
Salarians, Quarians... and all the... unique talent I brought to my team. Everybody brings something
different to the fight, and when you combine it all? Well, you saw the result."

"Sure as hell did. Impressive is what it is." Culver jerked her head slightly to indicate Vega, who
was leaning against the wall for support. "You need to take him in with you on a regular basis
instead of him sitting on his ass outside the doors, doing nothing but waiting on you to finish. And
before I leave, we're going to talk to Admiral Hackett. I know how you're going to spend the rest of
your time here."

Shepard's eyebrows rose. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Culver grinned. "I'm going to be sending you a squad at a time, new one every week or so,
and you're going to be personally teaching them as much of that shit as they can absorb in their time
here. Hackett would be a fool to decline the request, and he's nobody's fool. Trust me. You won't
be bored anymore."

Her attention shifted to the lieutenant. "And you, Mr Vega, should be able to start helping her out
after a couple of weeks in there with her."

Vega pushed himself up off the wall, a tired grin on his face. "Yes, Ma'am. Be happy to. I learned
more in those forty-five minutes than I have in the last six months with the tactics and training guys
here."

Culver nodded and turned her attention back to Shepard. "How about we talk to the Admiral and
then hit the mess to replenish your reserves a bit? Then, hate to say it, but I've got to get back on the
road."

"Sounds good." Shepard's smile faded a bit. "Except for that last part. It's been great spending
some time with you, Sharon. I wish we could do it on a regular basis."

"Me too, Shep." Culver ran a hand through her short black hair, which now had tinges of silver
starting to show through, and her voice got quiet. "Some days I really miss you."

Shepard shook herself. "Hey. Enough of that sad shit. When this is all done, we'll both take some
vacation time and go do something together. Do some honest catch-up."

The smiles came back as Sharon clapped her on the shoulder. "Now, that sounds like a plan."

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Hackett readily agreed to the training, his only consternation arising from the fact that he hadn't
thought of it on his own. Shepard had no problem keeping busy after that, and as word spread, it
wasn't just the special operations teams that ended up being sent for training. Her schedule was soon
maxed out and Liara was thrilled, knowing Shepard didn't have time to be depressed about her
situation anymore. Even better, Shepard knew she was actually contributing to the readiness effort and hoped the training would allow at least a few more soldiers to come out alive at the tail end of the war.

Liara's reports started to reflect contacts with Cerberus, all of them obviously looking for the same thing: a way to defeat the Reapers. Miranda ran into them on Eden Prime as she was checking on Oriana, prompting yet another relocation of her sister's family. She had finally told them all the truth about what was going on, and while Oriana's foster parents ran back to Earth in panic, Ori took the information with typical Lawson control. The last place she wanted to go was anywhere near the old family estate on Earth. Instead, she settled on one of the oldest existing Human colonies, Demeter, and got a job as an instructor at the Ross School of Art.

Arlyna ran into a Cerberus crew out in the Armstrong Nebula, checking out a Prothean ruin on Antibaar. Liara had laughed when Arlyna referred to the resultant altercation as "a nice little fight, over a nice little Prothean data disc... in the middle of a damn large Thresher nest." Arlyna promised the Chiroqul would drop by as soon as they could make transit to Earth to deliver the disc they had recovered. Given all the effort required to retrieve it, she hoped it contained something Liara could use.

Liara's most shocking report had come from Livos Tanni. Feron had somehow gotten a lead on an important cipher that was located, of all places, back on Kahje. As he led the team through the underwater shrine to the data archives, they were ambushed by a Cerberus team lying in wait. It quickly became evident to Livos that it was a set-up, but the Cerberus team was not prepared to handle three biotic commandos who had lived and worked together as a team for over a century. Feron was very unhappy with the outcome of the skirmish and tried to buy back his life with the codes to access the archives. Livos let him think he had a deal, but as soon as the data was copied and he handed her the disc, she pinned him to the wall with her biotics.

Captain Tanni growled, her voice coming from somewhere deep in her throat. "You are a worm. I know the stories. I know you worked for Cerberus and the Shadow Broker, all while you pretended to help Mistress Liara. When you figured out she was going to win, you changed sides and bought her favor the exact same way back then, with a data disc. But she never truly trusted you... apparently with good reason! That is why she assigned me to you. To watch. To listen." Livos' voice was filled with disdain. "There is little more precious than loyalty and nothing more evil than betrayal."

Livos kept Feron pinned to the wall and as he begged uselessly for his life, she pulled out her pistol. "You are kena sa'ki, but you will never have the opportunity to deceive her again."

They left his crumpled body with those of the Cerberus troops and quickly departed Kahje without a backward glance. Between the two discs, Liara was able to piece together a decryption key for various Prothean archives, one of which was on Mars. She immediately took the information to Admiral Hackett and was quickly granted access to the facility with instructions to the on-station personnel that Dr T'Soni's project would take precedence over all others currently in work. Riana completely took over the Normandy node of the Broker network and Liara relocated to Mars without delay.

The decryption key opened vast amounts of previously inaccessible data, but it was still all in Prothean text so progress was slow. In order to translate the data, Liara had to maintain a trace link over the vast distance between the Mars facility and Earth to tap into the Prothean Cipher Shepard carried in her head. It was exhausting for Liara and prompted more frequent nightmares on Shepard's side, but they forged ahead, not really having much choice. Their prolonged separation wasn't helping and they found that as more time passed, their link was slowly getting weaker,
making it even more tiring to connect over the distance. Toward the end of the fifth month after the start of Shepard's incarceration, Liara finally located a block of data that was very unique. It was not normal historical data like the majority of the text they had previously translated. It contained diagrams and mathematical formulae that were difficult to understand, especially with the fatigue factor that had begun to set in, slowing the rate of progress yet again. Liara contemplated downloading everything to a portable archive and moving to Earth to be closer to her Cipher source, but the request was denied. The information was classified too high to be removed from the facility and there was no way Shepard could go to her, so knowing the danger was growing more critical by the day, she and Samantha struggled on, supporting one another as best as they could through each of their own challenges.

Liara felt she had just made a major breakthrough in the translation when she received dire news from one of two agents she had secreted away out in the Skyllian Verge, one in Kite's Nest and the other in the Petra Nebula, the two systems closest to Bahak. She immediately forwarded the information to Admiral Hackett before tapping Shepard through the link. The Batarian's home star cluster of Kite's Nest had gone dark, along with their homeworld of Khar'Shan. The Reapers had emerged from dark space and now had access to the relay in the Kite's Nest at Harsa. The Galaxy's preparation time had expired. The Reapers were no longer coming... They were here.

Chapter End Notes

Wow! So, here we are... the final chapter of 'Working With the Enemy!' I just want to thank all of you who have come along for the ride... for your comments, critiques and encouragement. It's been fun, and I'm glad to have you aboard! Special thanks are due for Theodur, AlsoKnownAsMatt, Yestare70 and Old Gamer for your awesome feedback. You made writing this story so much more fun!

I'm in the process of sketching the outline for Book 4 - 'Could Not Stop for Death.' I imagine I should have an outline and the first couple of chapters through my Beta by mid-February so I can begin posting the next installment in the Chronicles of Samantha Shepard.

In the meantime, I'll continue to add chapters to the QuickShotsII series to continue the expansions on my OCs.

Hope to see you all on the flip-side!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!