Summary

Krysta Shepard loses her love, Kaidan, on Virmire. Now she has to brave the fight against the Reapers by herself. She falls in love with an unsuspecting ally and finds herself conflicted. She always thought she would have feelings for humans only, but not an alien. Torn, she struggles to move forward with the war knowing she would once again face death.

Series inspired by the song "Solace" by Comaduster
Chapter 1

Solace
Chapter 1

Darkness swirled all around her like a maelstrom. Her body felt cold and warm at the same time. Unknown muffled voices came from above. Krysta Shepard strained to make out who was talking and what was being said, but it was a feign attempt. The last thing she remembered was the hellish inferno of the Normandy and the coldness of space. Did she die? Was this the promised afterlife? Her mind floating in darkness? She yearned to speak out in hopes that someone would hear her and place light back into where she was, but no words would come out. Her voice was only heard in her mind. “Where the hell am I? Hello?! Joker, do you copy?!?” She struggled to suppress fear and panic.

“Shepard…” Kaidan Alenko’s soft response put a sense of calm upon her.

“Kaidan?” There was no sign of him around. His voice was so distant.

“I know you.” He replied with a soft chuckle. “You are strong, Krysta. You really think they would get to you?”

“Kaidan…how can this be? Virmire…I thought you were dead.” Her words trembled. Did he somehow overcome the nuclear blast that took out the breeding facility? How could that be possible?

“Listen. I don’t have much time.” Alenko became sterner as she could almost feel his warm breath against her skin. “Humanity needs you. You are not out of this fight.” Then a transparent outline of his form appeared before her. His brown eyes staring back at her. She could feel his hand caressing her face, a smile spread across his lips.

She nuzzled against his hand and tried to touch him back. “Kaidan, I need you.”

“I love you, Shepard. Your time is not here yet. I can wait.” He chuckled.

“What do you mean?” She asked.

The deafening sound of klaxons made the darkness quickly disappear along with her former love. “No!” She reached out to grab him, but he was gone within an instant. Bright lights made her shield her eyes as she groggily sat up on the table to view her surroundings. Explosions rocked her location nearby.

“Shepard! You need to get out of there! The facility is under attack!” An unfamiliar woman’s voice came over the intercom. “Hurry, Shepard!”

Krysta examined the empty lab with her brown eyes. She was dressed in a military casual attire and her body ached all over. A Cerberus insignia decorated the door. She narrowed her eyes, recognizing it. What did a known human terrorist group want with her? Kaidan told her that humanity needed her, but even he was against Cerberus. “I guess I can’t mull over it now…” She muttered under her breath as she made herself shove off the table to gain her footing. A little wobbly, but once she found her balance, she sprinted towards the door.

“Move a little faster!” The woman barked at her again through the PA system.
Krysta glared up at the speaker. “That bitch is really getting on my nerves.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Krysta Shepard doesn't like her new allies. Will she ever get over Kaidan?

SOLACE

CHAPTER 2

Taking a deep breath, Krysta stepped across the threshold of the Normandy SR-2 where it was docked at the Cerberus station. The new smell of the interior enticed a sense of adventure and calmness all at once. She could hear the staff chattering amongst one another from their posts as they were going over all the final checks before take-off. She longed for familiar voices like Pressley and Jenkins.

“Hello? What? No love for the pilot?” Joker teased from where he sat in his chair to the left of where she stood. “Gee, thanks.”

This cracked a smile from Krysta’s lips. Leave it up to Moreau to bring a sense of humor to every situation. At least, there was one familiar person, who was part of the original crew and non-Cerberus. She entered the cockpit to see him sitting there with a cheesy grin as he pressed back against the chair. “That looks pretty comfortable. Don’t fall asleep while flying.” She teased him.

He rubbed the padded arms of the chair and chuckled. “Sweet, right?”

“Is that how Cerberus bought you? A fancy soft chair?” Krysta looked out the viewport to the structured port outside of where the ship was berthed. Despite being in her “ally’s home”, she felt guarded and paranoid. She remembered dealing with Cerberus with Admiral Kohaku years ago. She never did trust them and just because they saved her life, would not change that mentality.

Joker pouted and slumped back against the chair. “Ouch. Come on, Commander. You know why.” He pointed out defensively. “They mentioned your name and I was sold.”

Her brown eyes moved directly upon him. “How would you know it was me? Maybe it could have been a clone.” She tossed out, playing devil’s advocate.

“Pfft...clone? Yeah, don’t think Cerberus would do that.” Joker rolled his eyes. “Humanity needs you…Cerberus supports humanity…I had to trust them.”

“I don’t.” Krysta spat as she crossed her arms and took a backwards glance to the flight crew. “Especially Miranda and Jacob. I don’t like people spying on me.”

“Jacob’s alright…Miranda…well. She-she’s good.” He cleared his throat sheepishly.

Krysta rolled her eyes this time. She knew the tight uniform that Miranda paraded around in that tend to sinuate her curves. Krysta was thankful that they didn’t try to doll her up in that wear. “Pig…” She huffed under her breath.
“I would just be careful...you know about EDI, right? The AI? She probably is recording this conversation right now.” His voice grew quieter.

“That would be a negative, Mr. Moreau.” EDI’s voice broke up their conversation as her holographic form appeared on the stand next to him. “I’m programmed to only record conversations when directed upon.”

“Who? Us or Cerberus?” Krysta countered, distrustfully.

“I am here to assist you, Shepard.” EDI responded.

“That didn’t answer my question.” Shepard sighed. She didn’t feel like standing there and arguing with a non-sentient being. “I’m going to head to my cabin, Joker. Alert me when we get to the Citadel. I need to see more familiar faces.”

“Aye-Aye.” Joker whirled around in his chair to man the controls once the checks came back.

Krysta avoided eye contact with the Cerberus flight crew as she walked down the narrow aisle that took her to the CIC towards the elevator. If she remembered correctly, her cabin would be on the top level. The red head named Kelly Chambers broke away from her work to smile gleefully at her with her bright green eyes. “Nice to meet you! I wanted to let you know that I have already reviewed your psych profile to make a proper analysis and would love to schedule our first counseling session once you are settled in.”

“My what?” The request was so odd that it threw Krysta off.

“I read what happened on Torfan. I imagine that it was a very difficult decision and probably has lingered for some time now.”

She spent years defending her call on Torfan and knew that some of her post squadmates held a grudge against her for that. It didn’t matter to her. She got shit done and the Alliance knew it. That was what being in command meant. To make the tough decisions and to take blame when something goes South. She sacrificed majority of her men, but she wiped out the batarian bastards on Torfan. The same four-eyed aliens that were responsible for the innocent lives taken on Elysium. Since the massacre on Elysium, she like most humans had a resentment towards batarians. She had a brief encounter again shortly before her untimely death when she had to save Terra Nova from destruction. A group of terrorists led by Balak, hijacked an asteroid that scientists were studying and had every intention to ram it into the capital city, killing thousands. Luckily, Krysta got get there in time to stop them and kill Balak. She killed all of them without hesitation. As long as she lived, she would never trust any batarian that she met. That was one thing that she and Cerberus had in common. “Look, your job, Kelly, is to take messages for me. I do not want you to sit there and try to analyze me.” She pivoted on her heel and entered the elevator before giving the shocked Cerberus officer a chance to reply.

Once the elevator doors closed, Krysta sighed heavy and stared at the shiny silver walls. “This will never be the same.” A few seconds later, the doors reopened and she came to the door to her cabin. Inside was a very luxurious bedroom that was three times the size of her old room on the SR-1. It contained a large empty fish tank, a king size bed, a nightstand with a holo alarm clock, terminal, large closet, private bathroom and a desk. Seated perfectly on the desk was a framed picture of Kaidan Alenko. Seeing his charming eyes, she walked slowly over as sadness overcame her. Her fingertips gingerly ran down the frame’s sides, but she didn’t dare to pick it up. “Kaidan…”

EDI’s holo form popped up on her station at the doorway that was across from where Krysta stood. “I hope your accommodation is satisfactory. Interviews and logs were reviewed to get an
understanding on your likes and dislikes. There was data confirming your relationship with Mr.
Alenko. His termination was on Virmire. The decorators felt it was important to have items here to
create a tranquil setting."

Being reminded again that Kaidan was out of her life, Krysta shook and she gripped the frame tightly
with her fingers as hot tears streamed down her face. She yelled out and tossed the photo frame to the
side. EDI’s form didn’t flinch from the display. “Shall I alert the decorators to bring you another item
before our departure?”

Krysta angrily turned towards the AI. “No, dammit. Just turn your fucking self-off and do not alert
me until we get to the Citadel. No more guests or visitors.”

“As you wish.” The holo disappeared.

Seconds later, EDI popped up on her station back at the cockpit. “Shepard did not like the photo, Mr.
Moreau. You were correct. How did you know?”

“Come on. It’s obvious.” Joker shook his head. “Are all Cerberus employees machines?”

“I do not understand.”

“I’ll explain it to you when you grow up.”

“I’m an artificial intelligence. I do not have a solid form. I cannot ‘grow up’.”

Joker groaned. “Just shut up for now. Geez.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Krysta feels like all her friends have left her. Is Cerberus only there for her? Who else is on to her resurrection?

Solace
Chapter 3

“You surprise me, Shepard.” Miranda commented, the sounds of her heels clicking behind Krysta in the ward’s hallway.

“What about?” Krysta asked sharply. She was not too keen on the idea of being followed by Cerberus operatives on the Citadel. She wanted to make a stop prior to tracking down their first dossier. She needed to find Captain Anderson, another familiar face from her past. She was lucky to still have Joker and Dr. Chakwas. She ran into Tali on Freedom’s Progress, but her quarian colleague was reserved. She seemed distant to her, despite what they endured together with their fight against Saren and the Geth. Tali instantly accused her of working with Cerberus and the quarians had no love for the pro human organization. The name of the group rolled off Tali’s tongue like poison. She loathed them. She made a mental note to question about Tali about this further in private, if she was ever given the chance. Tali did not volunteer to rejoin her. She moved on. The story of her life, it seemed.

“After reviewing your files, I would have presumed that you would not want to be reinstated. Then you could remain off the grid.” The black-haired Cerberus agent answered matter-of-factly.

Krysta glanced back at her briefly then focused her attention back towards her destination, navigated through the mixture of aliens and their pheromones that crowded the walkways. “I guess all your intel was wrong, Ms. Lawson.” She intentionally didn’t call Miranda by her first name to show that her and Jacob were not in her friendzone. She could almost feel the daggers shooting out of Miranda’s blue eyes that produced a smirk from her lips. Point her.

“I can understand that, Shepard. I mean you earned that title. Why throw it away?” Jacob intervened lightheartedly. He always so dutiful, trying to mediate the tension that remained between the two women.

Krysta’s instant response would be too cast off something snarky to him, but seeing that he agreed with her, she decided to hold fast and just ignore them. She had no ill feelings towards Jacob Taylor, despite him being Cerberus. He had his reasons on why he joined; reasons that she almost agreed with. She had to remain cordial with him, just in case she needed more details on Cerberus’ operations in the future.

A light blue skinned asari with light green facial markings approached the group with a wide-eyed expression on her face. “By the goddess, Shepard, you are still with us. The news reports claimed you were killed.”
Krysta studied the alien’s face to try to recall her memory bank on who this asari was, but no names were coming to her. “Thank you, Miss….uh.”

“Alexis T’veari. You don’t really know me…I work on the Presidium and saw you pass by from time to time when I took strolls from my office. I always kept up with the reports. I’m just thankful you manage to save us when Saren attacked.” She reached out and took Shepard’s hand as if she was studying it. “I can’t believe it.”

Krysta snatched her hand away quickly in embarrassment. “It’s me. I am not a damn specimen.”

Alexis blinked and took a step back to give Krysta some more personal space. “My apologies…I got carried away. Welcome back, again, Commander. Excuse me.” She turned and scurried back from wherever she came from and seemed to round the corner pretty quickly.

Miranda exchanged a confused look over to Jacob, who shrugged in return. “That was odd.”

Krysta kept her brown eyes in the direction that the asari left. “I’ll say. I didn’t get that much attention when I was alive.”

“Archangel is really pissing me off, Aria. You need to do something.” Tarak, the leader of the Blue Suns, demanded as the four-eyed batarian glared hard down where Aria T’Loak sat comfortably on her red couch with a drink in her hand.

From where he was standing, Bray really couldn’t see directly at the pair, but he could pretty much guess the look that the queen of Omega was giving Tarak and it made him laugh on the inside. He was hoping that she would blast him with a biotic and provide some entertainment for the evening. Aria didn’t mind displaying her powers right in the open of the club. It showed her dominance. “Garm and Jaroth were here days ago. I’ll tell you the same thing that I told them.” A beat. “Deal with it.”

An orange salarian clambered his way up the stairs to where the platform was. Bray held up his hand to stop him and held out his hand for the datapad that the other was carrying. He recognized him as one of her intel ops. Ex-STG from Surkesh. Aria paid way more for his skills than his own government and the perks were not bad at all. “One of our moles at the Citadel sent this over.” The amphibious alien explained as Bray took the pad from him.

Bray glanced down to read over the transmission. He only could pick up the name ‘Shepard’ before Aria caught him. “What is it, Bray?” The batarian tensed up. He knew that she did like it when others read over reports before her, but curiosity got the best of him. He scowled and marched up the steps.

“Report from Citadel.” He handed it to her; keeping any of the details to himself. Though he still wondered what the rest of the report’s body disclosed. He watched her blue eyes skim over the words and she dismissed Tarak away with the wave of her hand. Without a word, she stood up and walked over to the edge of her platform to look on the group of club-goers below. Her gait was straight and guarded. She was tense. Something about what the mole reported really bothered her. “Bray, go down and tell them I want more details about what has been shared. Tell Alexis that I want a DNA sample.”

“A DNA sample?” Her lackey scratched his head. The order was very tangent.
She spun on her high heel to look directly at him. Her accusatory eyes glaring hard at him, frustrated that he was questioning the order. He gulped. “I’ll get on it.”

“Yes, see that you do.” Aria turned back around to look out.

Bray shook his head as he made his way through the crowd to exit the club towards the streets of Omega. What was the big deal about this Commander Shepard? She saved the Citadel, so what? She was dead…Aria even helped get her body. Then again, their moles never really had been wrong before. Even if she happened to be alive, what did it matter? What was all the fuss about some human?
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Captain David Anderson didn’t move as he leaned on the banister that overlooked the gardens of the Presidium. After Saren was defeated, the Council agreed that humanity proved their worth and invited for a new member to join their ranks. Krysta gave her recommendation for him versus Udina and that carried tremendous weight since she was their savior. Udina was humanity’s ambassador and knew all the political bullshit that went on with the Council, but he was an ass and Krysta couldn’t stand him. She loved the look on his face when she chose Anderson over him. Anderson was better suited for military and even he knew it, but Udina did nothing for her when she had a time trying to prove her case with Saren and only did what he could to make himself look good. Despite leaving Miranda and Jacob out in the hallway once they reached Anderson’s office, David remained silent. Somehow, he knew that she was alive and her Spectre status was reinstated. A message pinged his terminal as soon as she logged in upon her arrival. Though the space between the two was not the same. The air seemed thick. It seemed like they were distant strangers instead of old crewmates. “How long are you going to stand there and not say a damn word?” Krysta bluntly spat. She never was the one who held back what she was thinking.

The dark-skinned man lifted his head as if he was in deep thought. “I guess it all hasn’t sunk in yet. I was hoping you were alive…but with Cerberus? That was very unexpected.”

“The Alliance left me out there to rot…you know I have no love for Cerberus, but at least they gave a damn.”

Angrily, Anderson turned around to face her. “That’s not true. Cerberus just got to you faster. I gave a damn and so did your crew!”

“You know I always fight for humanity, sir.” Krysta stiffened up. She didn’t tend on going toe-to-toe with her old commanding officer. “Right now, I want to figure out why our people are disappearing. If I must make a deal with the devil, then at least it’s a devil that I know.”

“You think you know.” Anderson’s voice softened up. “There’s limited data on the Illusive Man. No one outside Cerberus has really seen him and only a select few in the organization do. I can’t trust a person that I cannot see.”

“I want to get in touch with Ashley. Where is she?”

David casted his gaze back out on the Presidium once more. His face conflicted. “I’m sorry, Shepard. I can’t give you contact information. Before you ask, just don’t. It’s all classified.”

Krysta shook her head in disbelief. It seemed like everyone on her old crew was abandoning her. If Kaidan Alenko was still alive, would he do the same? Without a single rebuttal, she moved her way to the door to leave. There was nothing more to discuss right now. Not until she got information about what the Collectors wanted and it seemed like the only person feeding her information was Cerberus. She would have to play their game for now. Her plan would be to pick up their first dossier. A krogan named Okeer. A replacement for Wrex. She never really had much contact with
aliens outside her query for Saren and after what happened on Torfan, she really didn’t care to. Despite what prejudices she held in her earlier years, she missed her old crew…all of them, even the aliens.
The chirp at her door woke Krysta up from her slumber. “What in the hell…” She groaned as she rolled over to glance over at her holo clock to see it read, “0200.” The chirp sounded again. Stumbling in the dark, Krysta fetched her robe and slipped it over her shoulders as she moved towards the cabin’s door. “This better not be some Cerberus update…” She muttered under breath; thinking about all the colorful words she could use, especially against Miranda. “Who is it?” She asked out tiredly.

“Grunt.” The newest member of the Normandy answered.

The guest surprised her. Not who she thought would be at the door. She opened the door to see the tank bred krogan staring at her. “Smart, battle master.”

“What?” Krysta squeezed over towards the wall as the krogan entered, not waiting for an invitation. Not like she could stop an alien that most likely weighed three times her own.

“Asked who was at the door before just opening it. Not reckless.” He paused. “How did you know for sure it was me?”

“You’re the only krogan on my crew and on this ship.” Shepard shook her head. She was not in the mood to play a mind game right now. “Why are you up here?” She yawned.

“I can’t sleep.” Grunt eyed her cabin. “Decided to check out your ship. See how secure we are. Your crew didn’t seem too happy.”

“Gee, I wonder why.”

“I wanted to see how strong you were. I’m bored. I shoot things when I’m bored. When are we going to fight?” He stopped at her fish tank and his jaw dropped. He raised his hand over the glass and moved it to where the fish were scurrying about, alarmed to his presence. “How do I get out the snacks?” He turned to look at her.

“Excuse me?” Krysta walked over to where he was.

“The fish.” Grunt eyed the tank once more, licking his lips hungrily. “I need a snack. These will do.”

“You’re not eating my fish.” Krysta rubbed her eyes in frustration and from sleep deprivation. “If you want some food, I can fetch Rupert to fix you something. Though, I thought you already had dinner.”
This didn’t please the krogan and growled in annoyance as he stepped away from the fish tank. “Krogans don’t eat like the squishy humans. We drink and eat every couple of hours. I’ll eat just about anything, but your cook didn’t have anything appealing…chicken tenders? What is a tender? What is a chicken? Doesn’t sound very tasty. I wanted varren legs or pyjack arms.”

“We don’t have that…I can place a requisition for you in the morning.” Krysta crossed her arms, becoming impatient on just how long this conversation was going. Was he ever going to leave? She really didn’t want to spend the next five hours with him in her cabin asking off the wall questions.

“I guess…I can try a chicken…” Grunt sounded a bit disappointed by her answer. “What is it?”

“It’s a medium size bird creature with origination from Earth. They have feathers and normally the humans would fry up their body parts like the legs and wings.” Krysta sighed hard. “Can we really talk about this in the morning, Grunt?”

Grunt eyed her holo clock. “It is morning, Shepard.” He pointed out flatly. “These birds sound too soft…if the humans cook the legs and wings…then what is a tender?”

Defeated, Krysta took his arm. “Come on, Grunt. Let’s go down to the mess and I’ll let you try it. Trust me, you will love them.”

Burping loudly in satisfaction, Grunt licked his lips to capture all the remnants of the chicken from his skin. “Tasty. You have anymore?”

Krysta couldn’t help but to giggle as she moved over to the freezer compartment to check their hold. “I already fixed you twenty, Grunt. Just how much do you krogan eat in one feeding?” She was beginning to rethink this dossier. They would be searching the galaxy for food rather than their next missions. Luckily, she was not footing the bill for the expenses nor the Alliance. She didn’t recall Urdnot Wrex eating this much aboard the SR-1, but then again, she never really hung out with him too much. Pretty much, they kept to themselves and only talked if it pertained to the missions. She was so hell bent on defeating Saren that she remained enclosed in her cabin throughout most of that. A part of her regretted it. Ever since her resurrection, she felt more alone than she did then. Now, though with Grunt, a part of her was lighting up.

“I’ll tell you when I’m full.” Grunt sat as he watched her tend to his request. “So, battle master, where are we going to?”

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that.” Shepard plopped the tenders down in the fryer basket. She never thought she would be doing cooking tasks aboard her own ship, but even she didn’t have the heart to get Rupert out of bed to feed their hungry guest. She sort of enjoyed the company even though he was not a human.

Grunt tilted his head in confusion. “Why not? Hey, you have any Ryncol here?”

“No.”

“You need to get that too. Though you squishy humans can’t handle it.”

“That so?” Krysta placed her hand on her hip. She was getting tired of being called “squishy” by the burly krogan.
Grunt gave a light-hearted shrug. “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“By the way, we are going to Omega next.” She returned to his original inquiry and then lifted the basket out of the hot oil after the alarm went off.

Grunt happily watched, anticipating the tenders coming to him. “I have never been there. Sounds fun.”

Thinking to the details about what they were going up against on the asteroid station, Krysta shook her head as she placed the tenders on the plate. “You can’t go, Grunt.”

He paused before digging in. “Why not?” His voice rose in aggravation. “Don’t leave me on this ship, Shepard.” The statement was almost threatening and she tensed up.

“Two of my dossiers are there. Due to bad blood, I would prefer not to have a krogan on my team.” She left it at that, trying to make it politically correct as possible.

Grunt began feasting on the tenders. “A turian and salarian are there.” His words garbled by the food and pieces of the chicken were all over his mouth once more. Krysta tried not to gag by the sight. She never really sat down and watched a krogan eat before. “Afraid that I may kill them?”

“I need them for the mission and cannot afford to choose sides right now.” She slumped her head on her hands as she leaned over the counter tiredly.

“I won’t shoot them. Unless they piss me off.” Grunt wiped his mouth off with the back of his arm. “What’s the turian’s name?”

“Only was given a code name: Archangel.” Another alien she would have to adapt to.”


Aria was watching one of the dancer’s performance from her seat when one of her aids approached her platform. She motioned Bray and Moklan to step aside to allow the newcomer to proceed forward. “Yes, what is it?” She was kind of perturbed that her show was interrupted.

“Commander Shepard has entered the port, Aria. The ship was flagged as Cerberus, but has Alliance markings SR-2 on the side.” The green skinned young asari stated.

This rose alarm in Aria, but she didn’t allow that to show on the outside. She didn’t really trust Cerberus and she never encountered this Commander Shepard before other besides when Krysta was dead and her body was being fought over. Spectres were armed and well trained plus she had Cerberus backing. Krysta no longer spoke for the Alliance so as far as Aria was concerned, she was rogue and could do whatever the hell she wanted. Even if it meant starting a war with Omega. Aria surely had the numbers to overwhelm the Spectre, but at what cost it would be to her and the station? There was no sense in playing games, she wanted to know exactly why Shepard was here and if there was any profit for her. “Moklan?”

“Yeah?” The batarian turned to her attention.

“Hurry up and get down there. I want Shepard to come here first before she sets another step on Omega.”
“I’ll get on it.”

She waited a few minutes before giving out the next order. “Bray?”

Her bodyguard turned around to look at her. He seemed to always know what she was thinking. Amazingly, he was one step ahead of her. “She won’t come.”

“Exactly. That’s not Shepard’s style.” Aria stared out in deep thought. “Follow her, Bray. See where she goes and who she talks to.”

“I’m on it.”

Hanging around near the dock, Bray stayed back in the ground and watched the group of transits navigating the lines to leave and enter their designated ships. He cursed under his breath when he saw Moklan storming through the group, heading back to Afterlife in frustration. He hated to be right. It seemed like this Commander Shepard ignored the request, which was more like a demand, when it came from Aria T’Loak. Krysta seemed to not really care. No one else was following Moklan, so where the hell was she? Exhaling from his large nostrils, Bray moved back into the crowd to work his way where the arrivals were. A few civilians recognized him to be one of Aria’s and seemed to flatten themselves against the wall to get out of his way. One of the perks he would get from time to time among other things. He just hoped that the separation of the lines wouldn’t catch onto Shepard. Once the blonde woman came into view, he noticed she was in conversation with another, but he couldn’t tell who. Stepping closer, he finally recognized who the other human was. A well-known scragglily man on Omega. A mercenary known as Zaeed Massani. In tow, the merc had another batarian who was beaten up badly. Some unlucky bastard who had a contract on him. Bray never really had direct interaction with Zaeed, but he saw him on the streets one time talking with a weapons vendor. Sounded like a loon, but the kind of loon that would kill you in cold blood without thinking twice if you crossed him or dared to look at him the wrong way. He seemed to have a grudge against batarians so Bray found himself keeping his distance. Luckily, the bastard didn’t have the creds to step foot in Afterlife and if he did, he didn’t really care to. With Shepard was a krogan in standard armor, not a merc, Bray noted and another male human with Cerberus markings on his uniform.

He pressed his back casually up against the wall and took out a cigarette for a smoke as he watched the group interact. The conversation probably had no real importance to him so he kept his distance. He felt the smoke flowing through his mouth and nostrils as he stood there. The krogan looked around with interest while the male human did the same but in alarm. Due to the bustling of the crowds, no one picked up on him yet. A few minutes later, Shepard and Zaeed shook hands then the Cerberus agent nodded his head to her before returning towards the ship. Zaeed remained. Snubbing his cigarette out under his boot, Bray watched on with interest. Did the loon just join up with her? Why? She didn’t appear to be all that great. Any other typical human to him.

Seeing the group move in his direction, he casually turned from his position and moved with the crowd towards Afterlife, looking back every now and then to see them heading in the same direction. Confident that they were coming to see Aria, he quickened his steps, but not too much, and moved around the elcor bouncer and up the stairs where two more batarians manned the doors. He paused to the one on the right and tapped him on the shoulder with his hand. Without looking back at Shepard, he said to him, “Let Shepard and her crew pass. Aria wants to talk to her.”

Once he returned, Aria was standing up and skimming over a datapad in her hand. “She’s coming.” He announced as he retook his position.

“Really? I’m reading over the highlights now that our intel managed to scrounge up in the limited
time.” She turned to face him. “Ready for the show?”

The purple asari in front of her really didn’t pose a threat to Krysta as she spoke with her to gather what information she could about the two dossiers. So far, it sounded like a mess. How come nothing was ever simple? One dossier was pinned by three large merc groups on Omega and the other was working a plague zone that seemed to infect everyone except for humans and vorcha. She didn’t have any vorcha on her crew, nor she did really want any and she really didn’t trust any of her human companions, not even Zaeed. She couldn’t risk losing Grunt to some damn infection. Archangel may be the safer bet right now. If she wasted time, the merc groups would eventually wear him down and get to him. Aria didn’t seem too concerned on both matters, but was interested to know that Shepard had desires to find both Dr. Mordin Solus and Archangel. “Thank you for the information.” She said to T’Loak. She had a plan in place inside her head and it seemed their next point was still in the club. A room that was set up for recruitment by the Blue Suns.

“You need to relax.” Aria cooed with a smirk. “You need to find a nice young man to keep you warm.”

The statement pierced Krysta through her biotic shields and armor. She could hear the batarian bodyguard standing nearby chuckling under his breath. She glared at him hard with her brown eyes before addressing back to Aria. “Damn you.” She hissed dangerously under her breath. She knew the statement was not random. Aria was smart so she probably had all the dirt she could muster on Shepard before their meeting. Despite how hard she tried to keep her relationship with Kaidan hidden from the start, it was hard to do and even more difficult after his passing on Virmire. What Aria said was a blunt jab to her and only for her amusement, nothing more. She could hear the batarian chuckling a little more. More than she could take. She whirled around her heel and stepped up to him quickly, retrieving her pistol and shoving it hard up against his chin. “Don’t make me kill you, batarian.” She spat as she glared at him with hate in her eyes. Tensions rose up and she could hear the other bodyguards whipping out their own weapons in response, locking in on her and her team. Zaeed and Grunt brandied their own weapons as well.

Krysta didn’t flinch and held her gaze on the one in front of her. His hardened demeanor didn’t wince as he held her gaze. Was he calling her bluff or did he really show no fear towards her? Aria laughed and slapped her hands. “Thank you for the amusement, Shepard.” She motioned for her guards to put their guns away. “You still have some fight in you.”

Shepard held her position teasingly on the batarian, pressing the barrel of the pistol a little harder against his skin. “More than you know, Aria.” She replied coldly.

Aria stood up from her couch. “I would ask that you do not shoot Bray. He entertains me.”

“Stay the hell away from me, Bray.” Krysta removed her gun and placed it back in its holster. “I have killed many batarians before on Torfan and don’t think I would hesitate on you. Look that up in my file.” With that, she turned to leave the platform, not giving time for any snide comments. Zaeed and Grunt silently followed. She still fumed over the comment that Aria made. The blow about Kaidan was not what she needed right now. It reopened an old wound. Would she ever get over him?

“I would have shot him.” Grunt finally broke the silence. “A good fight is always fun in a club.”


Grunt cracked a smile. “I like you Zaeed.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

With Garrus severely wounded, Krysta has to find some way to get him off the station. Will her next task on Omega run her into even more trouble?

Mass Effect: Solace
Chapter 5

Garrus’ shallow breathing was not a good sign. He lost a lot of blood after taking a blast from the gunship. His blue blood stained Krysta’s hands, armor and the bottom of the hover crate she and he were housed in. Luckily for them, Garrus had acquired a shipping warehouse at his base of operations as Archangel. Hover crates were in the basement level and could be used as transport to get back to the Normandy discreetly. For now, the merc groups were neutralized, but if word got out that Archangel was down, they would pour in to finish him off. Calling a medical evac team from the Normandy was impossible. It would attract more attention than needed. Her choices for her squad were more than perfect. Zaeed still adorned his merc outfit and Grunt had standard issued armor with no markings on it. No would dare to mess with or question a disgruntled one-eyed merc and his krogan escort.

Applying medigel to what was left of his face, Krysta cringed and tried not to vomit from all the blood and exposed tissue. She felt Garrus’ hand blindly looking for hers. “Sh-shep-,” He tried to speak, but blood filled his mouth and he spat more out in the dark.

“Quiet, Garrus. Just hold tight.” Krysta used the light off her omni tool to provide some light. It wasn’t enough to assess the true nature of his condition, but it showed her what was pretty obvious. She reached out and grabbed his clambering hand, squeezing it tightly. “You are going to pull through.” She didn’t need another comrade of hers to die on her watch. Combat was rough and she had seen a lot of death in her years. However, it never got easier.

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Finally, after what it felt like eternity, she was back on the Normandy and Garrus was rushed to the med lab by Jacob Taylor and Grunt. Chakwas was already preparing the robotics for the emergency surgery repair. Miranda followed the team down to assist Chakwas. “Holy shit!” Joker watched on from his pilot’s chair as the chaos unfold in front of him. “Shepard, is he dead?!” His voice filled with alarm and panic as he saw all the blood over her armor.

With the interior lightening of the Normandy, Krysta now had full exposure to what Joker was referring to. The thick smell of blood invaded her senses and she could feel the stickiness of the remnants on her fingertips. The entire ordeal was overwhelming. Collapsing to the ground on all hands and knees, hyperventilating. “Shepard!” Joker rose up from his chair and limped over as fast as he could to her side.

“I-I’m fine…” She waved him away as she stood up on her knees to look in the direction that the team went. Several Cerberus crew members were looking over at her from their posts with concerned, shocked faces. She stood up and glared at them. “What the hell are you staring at?
Show’s over.”
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“Still haven’t decided on where to go next?” Garrus asked as he approached her from the elevator.

Krysta moved away from the galaxy map platform and stepped down to greet him with a smile.
“Why are you not sleeping like everyone else?”

“Hey, I just took a rocket to the face. I deserve some leniency.” He chuckled softly, then winced and touched his face. “Ow.”

“Serves you right for not being serious.” Krysta laughed softly.

“I’ve known you too long to not know you are hard core, Shepard, but every now and then, you need to laugh.” He smirked. “And I just completed my mission.”

Realizing that she dropped her guard, she cleared her throat and eyed the map. “I’m debating which dossier to get next.”

Garrus’ smile faltered. Back to business. “We are already here, why not that Salarian doctor?”

“You know anything about him?”

“Not really. I was too busy having the mercs chase me to really talk, plus that area is infected with some type of plague.”

“A plague that seems to hit everyone, but humans and Vorcha,” Krysta sighed heavily.

“Still don’t trust Cerberus?” Garrus read her mind. “I don’t blame you. Any group that promotes harm against alien species is not healthy. I know you have your reasons to join up with them and I want you to know that I’m one hundred percent behind you, Shepard.”

Krysta lifted her head from the map to overlook the empty chairs where normally the Cerberus staff members would be sitting, manning their posts during their normal operation hours. With the ship docked, there was no need for a skeleton crew. She actually liked this. She could be very open and honest with her old squadmate. However, most likely, the ship was bugged and she didn’t trust what EDI told her. “I can’t bring you, Garrus.”

“A little cold won’t take me down.” He gave her a playful wink.

“I meant the mercs.” She teased back. “I return back to Omega and suddenly, I have a turian squadmate roaming the streets with no sign of Archangel? No..I don’t need that much attention on me.”

Garrus became quiet. He knew that what she said made sense and he felt bad putting her in this predicament that she was in. “I remember a time when a certain vanguard class Alliance soldier didn’t trust turians to take her side.” He countered.

She gave him a sideways glance. “I still don’t. Hell, sometimes, I don’t trust my own species.”

“Well, people change, Shepard.” His voice grew darker and she couldn’t quite tell what he was getting at. “For someone who didn’t trust aliens, you fought alongside with an asari, a turian, a salarian and a krogan.”

“Not a salarian yet.” She pointed out.
“Kirrahe does count.” He grinned again, remembering their STG comrade. “Remember, Vir- “He cut himself off abruptly. “Sorry…”

Her brown eyes didn’t look at him as she blocked the painful memory. “I remember Kirrahe. He fought well against the krogan and geth.”

“Now, we just need you to like a volus, hanar, drell, elcor and a batarian and you should be set.”

Without looking at him, she scowled. “I don’t think I will ever like a batarian.”

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“Shepard, I have sent the coordinates to Dr. Solus’ med clinic to your omni tool. That should help us navigate the streets.” Miranda broke their silence after departing from their ship once more to the dirty smell streets of the station.

“Acknowledged.” Shepard intentionally didn’t check her omni tool to find their first waypoint nor turn in the direction of where they should be heading. Instead, she made a beeline towards Afterlife.

Their destination made the Cerberus agent behind her a bit uncomfortable. “Shepard, I don’t think you are heading in the right direction.”

“Trust me, I am.” Krysta cracked a hidden smile on her lips as she passed through the club’s doors. The pounding of the music enticed her to go even further inside.

“Glad, I’m with you, Shepard.” Zaeed spoke up with a chuckle as he walked along side Miranda. “I never had enough creds to step into this place. They would spit up on me like I was trash. Now, I get to see the entertainment.” His good eye following the asari dancers on the central stage.

Miranda rolled her blue eyes. “We are not here for entertainment, Massani. We have a job to do.”

“You going to be like this the whole trip?” Zaeed snarled back at her.

“What do you mean by that?” She shot back as if the question offended her.

Krysta paused at the bar, amused by the two quarreling behind her. The turian barkeep walked up to her to get her order. “Thessia sunset, make it strong.”

“Shepard?” Miranda called to her. “I think we need a clear mind for this mission.”

“Zaeed, you want anything?” She ignored the statement and glanced over at the merc. “Stick your tongue back in your mouth, Massani.”

“Yeah, I’ll take a beer.” Zaeed moved along beside her, his elbow propped up on the counter. “I like your style, Shepard. You may not be a tight ass after all.”

Without divulging her own personal matters, Krysta needed a drink to clear her mind. She didn’t sleep well with whatever hours she had left before their mission. Her conversation with Garrus opened old wounds that still seem to be festering. She longed for Kaidan. She could almost feel his arms wrapped around her, the warmth of his body, the feel of his breath lightly touching her skin. She needed him here and not some brown noser Cerberus agent and retired mercenary. Things were not the same anymore even with the old faces like Chakwas, Joker and Garrus. When would the pain stop hurting? She tuned out her squadmates for the time being and focused on her drink.

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“They’re back.” Bray called out to Aria from where he was standing, overlooking the dance floor below. His dark four eyes followed Krysta and her compatriots as they entered the club. Krysta didn’t seem very interested in what her colleagues had to say, she seemed troubled. She was seeking
isolation even though she was in a large crowd with followers. What was bothering her? He let his eyes linger on her squarely as she waited on the barkeep to fill her drink request. Her guard appeared to be down. She wasn’t eying the crowd carefully as she should have. Why did it matter to him that something was bothering her? It didn’t. Yet, he was curious.

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“Shepard, we should leave. We’re being watched.” Miranda nudged her commanding officer as she eyed the club and noticed the batarian from Aria’s booth, looking at them with interest.

“So, what?” Krysta downed her drink and silently debated if she should order another or not.

Zaeed looked in the same direction that Miranda noticed. “Just that four-eyed from yesterday.”

Krysta thought back to her encounter with the batarian. She scoffed under her breath. “I hurt his pride.” A part of her wanted to spin on her heel, face him, flip him off and return to her drinking, but she decided against it. Let him look. What did it matter? He wasn’t any threat to her.

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“Something wrong, Bray?” Aria’s voice calling to him from her couch made him break his focus. She eyed him suspiciously.

“That Spectre will bring the wrong attention to the station.” He fumbled for his words, trying to explain not only to her, but to himself why he was watching Krysta longer than it really seemed to matter.

“It’s a good thing, Bray.” Aria stood up to walk over to him. “That Archangel mess is cleaned up and I don’t have to hear the mercs whining to me ever again.”

“The mercs killed him.” Bray pointed out, recalling the intel that came in hours ago.

She lifted an eye ridge. “Did they?” Her voice filled with skepticism. She peered over the bannister to see Krysta and her team heading back out. “If you are so interested in her business, then why don’t you tail her and report back to me?”

“They are going after that doctor.” Bray blurted out. Her next order caught him off guard. He really didn’t want to tail them around the station, especially in the plague zone.

His statement didn’t faze T’Loak as she sat back down. Her deadpan look stated the obvious on what she was thinking. “Don’t be stupid, Bray. If she goes down there, then stay up here.” She rolled her eyes and waved him off.

Grumbling under his breath, he quickly moved down the steps towards where his query went. He didn’t like the sendoff he got from Aria. He always remained at her side and the task he was on was medial. Another job for her lackeys. Did he lose his position? He swore under his breath as he quickened his step to push through the crowds of patrons that were flooding the entranceway. A part of him didn’t want to leave the club. How long would he be? Would he be replaced? Then again, if he didn’t do what Aria asked, what would she think of him then? Was this a test of hers or was she playing games with him? Either way, he despised it. He wished Krysta Shepard never stepped foot on Omega. She was a real pain in the ass. Most humans were to him though.

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Miranda noticed their tail about ten minutes after they took all the zig-zag routes towards their destination. The layout of Omega was nothing compared to the Citadel. The alleys made no sense. Any novice wouldn’t have picked up on their guest. He was good and knew the streets well so most times he never had to keep in sight. When they rounded another corner, she quickened her step
casually to take Shepard’s side. “Shepard, we are being followed.”

“I know we are. That damn bastard is really pissing me off.” Krysta kept her cool and continued to move towards the blocked access towards the lower parts of the station where the plague infestation was growing. “I guess Aria really doesn’t like me here.”

“Want me to hang back and get rid of him?” Miranda offered.

“No. I don’t want Aria’s attention on me. We need this dossier so we can get the hell out of here.” She chewed on her lip. They were about three blocks away and there was a turn off coming up ahead. “Zaeed, you know the way?”

“Yeah. I know Omega like the back of my hand.”

“Lead Miranda and wait for me there. I’ll get rid of our tail.”

“You got it.”

Taking a breath, Krysta eyed the turn off point and casually side-stepped to take that route, becoming out of sight to the others while Miranda and Zaeed continued ahead. Once out of view, she ducked behind a few crates. “Okay, you bastard, what are you going to do now?” She whispered under breath as she gathered dark energy.

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The sudden break of the team alarmed Bray and he froze in his tracks. “What the hell?” He grumbled. Zaeed and Miranda didn’t seem to flinch as they continued their way, but now Krysta was no longer in view. He eyed the road she took suspiciously. He was armed, but he didn’t want to get in a firefight on the streets of Omega just yet. Clearly, if he followed Krysta, he was going to be ambushed. “Nice try, Shepard. You are not that great after all.” Shaking his head at the completely obvious, he trudged ahead to keep his sight on Zaeed and Miranda.

Twenty feet after passing the road that Krysta took, he suddenly felt an electrical charge surround his body, instantly freezing him in his steps. A stasis attack! He tried to flinch his arms to break it, but it was no use. The biotics held him in place. Then he heard the click of a pistol behind his head. His heart stopped. “Why are you following me?” Krysta held him still with her gun poised.

Bray couldn’t move to turn around to confront her. He gritted his sharp teeth. “Orders.”

“Well take Aria’s orders and shove them right up your ass, batarian.” She released the hold on him, but kept her weapon at the back of his skull.

“This is the second time you have drawn your gun on me, human,” He spat back sharply, deciding to trade species’ names with her. “Is this how you talk to everyone?”

“Just people I don’t trust.”

“You trust Cerberus it seems.” Bray stated the obvious as he motioned to her stopped compatriots. Zaeed and Miranda returned nearby just in case the encounter went south.

“That doesn’t concern you.”

“Look, this is Aria’s business.”

“You’re wrong. This dossier is my business. Tell Aria to stay out of it. I want you the hell away from me.”
“Fine.” He lowered his guard. “Can I go now?”

“One more thing.” Krysta eyed him cautiously. “Why were you watching me? Does Aria have a habit of keeping constant surveillance on people on her station?”

“Just the ones that interest her. We know your file. You could be dangerous.”

“Could be?” Krysta scoffed. “I saved the Citadel from Saren, and the Geth. I have seen more combat that you could ever hope for. Tell Aria the next time, she sends you or another of her lackeys to tail me…I will not hesitate on killing you.” Bumping his shoulder hard intentionally as she moved around, Krysta clenched her jaw as she moved towards Miranda and Zaeed. The way Bray looked at her, really bothered her. She never really had much close encounters with batarians before, but he seemed to make her feel uncomfortable. She knew people always complained of talking to them because they never knew which pair of eyes to address, but this was different. The way he held her gaze even when she struck fear into him, he remained solid. This made her feel a bit vulnerable. She hastened her steps towards where the turian was guarding the entrance to the slums. “I need to fucking get off this station.”
Chapter 6: Symbiont

Chapter Summary

Did Cerberus alter Krysta from her previous state? Why is she acting so weird? Why is Bray betraying Aria’s trust?

Inspired by the song "Symbiont" by Celldweller.

Mass Effect: Solace
Chapter 6

“Jacks are wild.” Jack dealt out the cards to everyone sitting at the table. Before heading off their next mission, Jack came up with the idea to play a few hands of cards to kill the time. With her were Kasumi Goto, their newest member on the squad, Garrus Vakarian, Zaeed Massani and Krysta Shepard.

“You can say that again.” Krysta gave her a sloppy teasing grin as she waited for all the cards to be handed out.

“Haha.” Subject Zero was not impressed as she moved the stack of unused cards next to her. “Very funny, Shepard.”

“Go easy on the new guy.” Kasumi re-organized her hand.

“And that’s coming from a thief.” Garrus casually tossed in as he placed two of his cards down to motion Jack to replace them.

“What?” Kasumi smirked. “That didn’t sound very convincing?”

“We doing strip poker. Right?” Zaeed leaned back against his chair, staring at his hand.

“No!” The chorus of responses came back at him.


“You really want to see a turian naked?” Garrus waited on everyone else to make their move.

“Seen it.” Jack nonchalantly commented as she replaced three of her cards.

“Details.” Kasumi chirped. Her eyes were hidden, but Krysta could almost imagine the sparkle in them.

Garrus cleared his throat and shifted his position in his chair. Shepard could tell the subject matter was making him a bit uncomfortable. He scooped up three of his chips and tossed them in the center of the table. “I’m in this time.”

Krysta eyed her own hand. She had two eights and nothing else good. She refrained from the natural reaction to frown. With him bothered by their previous topic, she couldn’t tell if he was bluffing or
not. Though she slightly sadistically enjoyed seeing him squirm from embarrassment. Serves him right after he shot her with concussive rounds on Omega. “I’ll take that bet, Garrus.” She let her fingertips linger on another chip and then tossed it in. “Raise one more.”

“Whoa! I love it, Shepard.” Jack didn’t hesitate and tossed in her own coins to match hers.

“Too rich for my blood.” Zaeed grumbled and threw his cards down. “I bloody fold.”

“Sure, I’m game.” Kasumi put her own coins in the pot.

“Sure?” Zaeed looked at her incredulously. “You don’t sound very confident.”

“I don’t?” Kasumi asked sarcastically. “I thought I did pretty good.”

“Damnit.” Garrus folded his own cards with frustration. “I’m out too.”

“Aw, Vakarian. So, you were bluffing!” Krysta chuckled teasingly at her turian crewmate. “

“Shep, show me.” Jack nudged her to focus back on the task at hand as she unveiled her own cards. “Two kings and a jack…making three kings.”

Krysta frowned and displayed her own. “Two eights.”

Zaeed busted out laughing, nearly spilling his bottle of beer. “You went to war with 2 lousy eights?!”

Shepard shrugged. “Sounded good.”

“Yeah? Remind me to sit out the next mission then.”

“That’s’ right. Where we going?” Kasumi sat back to allow Jack to scoop up their cards to shuffle for the next hand.

“Alchera.” Krysta never really told anyone where they were going next besides Joker. The next mission was more personal. Something she needed to get off her chest ever since the intel came through.

“Alchera?” Garrus was confused by the disclosure. “What’s there?”

“Normandy SR-1.” Krysta sighed hard, not really wanting to talk about this yet. “Her remains were found there. I need to see what I can find.”

“What’s so important about some crashed ship? This one is fucking awesome.” Jack shrugged as she began to deal out the next hand.

“I need to go. Solo. I owe it to my dead crew.” Krysta’s voice grew sterner. She didn’t say anything else, leaving it at that. She didn’t want to get into a debate about the importance of this next mission and she would dare Miranda or the Illusive Man put in their two cents. She hoped they knew better to really cross her.

The air grew silent and the whole meeting now became uncomfortable by how serious the atmosphere became. She could hear Kasumi sighing softly to herself. She hated to be a downer. “Garrus, I have to say. I’m pretty impressed with you.” Zaeed broke the ice.

“Oh?”

“You as Archangel. Had to have some balls to go up against all those merc groups. If I was still in
the Suns, I would definitely try to fry your ass.” Zaeed took another swig from his beer.

“Archangel?” Jack stifled a laughter.

“A name that the locals gave me. I didn’t pick it.” Garrus chuckled at his own teasing.

“I hated that place.” Krysta grumbled under her breath, but loud enough for everyone to pick up on.

“Why? I’ve been there a few times when I was younger. Got drunk, got a few tats, got laid.” Jack chuckled at her private memory. “Damn that was fun.”

“Oh? Which ones?” Kasumi glanced her way with interest.

“You really want me to show you?” Jack lifted her eyebrow playfully.

“No. Thank you.” Krysta stopped her before things got out of hand.

“ Heard you picked up an admirer, Shepard.” Garrus tossed out lightly. It was now his turn to get the upper hand and no longer be the blunt of the jokes. Krysta winced. He really had to go there…

“Yeah, I forgot about that.” Zaeed chuckled in amusement.

Krysta face palmed. “Please don’t.”

“Go on.” Kasumi perked up again.

“Bray.” Krysta admitted, feeling her face grow hot from embarrassment. Why did it really matter to her? It shouldn’t get to her. Why couldn’t she just laugh it off?

Kasumi nodded her head lightly. “Sounds cute.”

“He’s a batarian.” Krysta didn’t sound very thrilled. Kasumi didn’t really seem to have an opinion.

“I’d fuck him.” Jack shrugged as she changed out her cards. “What’s the matter with him?”

“He’s Aria’s lap dog and he’s a batarian…” Krysta growled lowly. “Why even I am having this conversation?” She rubbed her eyes tiredly. She made a mental note to get back at Garrus for this.

“I hate those damn batarians.” Zaeed chimed in.

“What’s wrong with them?” Kasumi still seemed confused.

Krysta couldn’t take it anymore. Standing up abruptly from the table, she threw her cards down. “I’m not having this conversation!” She stormed out of the room, fighting back the hot tears that desired to pour out. She would dare not do this in front of everyone. She would retreat to the privacy of her cabin. Her heart clung to her distant memory of Kaidan Alenko. Why couldn’t he be here? If he was, then none of this would matter. He would make it some private joke with her and that would be the end of it. She only preferred humans all her life for her relationships. Why were the encounters with Bray on Omega conflicting her internally so much? She was off the station now and done with Omega as far as she was concerned. She retrieved her dossiers and there was no business back there. Why couldn’t she get him out of her mind? Did Cerberus change her? Why would they?

Pressing the button for the floor for the infirmary on the elevator, she made her way to Dr. Chakwas. This was the only logical conclusion of her current status. A scientific explanation and hopefully a cure.
The gray-haired woman before her blinked at her inquiry. “I beg your pardon?”

Krysta felt embarrassed even more for having to repeat herself. “When Cerberus resurrected me… they used cybernetics…even you confirmed that. Did they place a chip in my brain or something to change my way of thinking?”

The question certainly stumped the doctor. “I did a scan upon your arrival, Shepard. I didn’t find anything in the scans that would alarm me to a control chip.”

“Miranda even mentioned to me that she would have done so if she was given the option to control me….” Krysta spoke out loud, recalling one of her earliest conversations with the woman. But why would Miranda, a pro-human eccentric, implant some control chip to make Shepard move towards aliens? It didn’t make any sense…unless the programming was scrambled.

Dr. Chakwas stood up from her desk to gently place her hand on her shoulder in a comforting gesture. “I’m sure you are fine, Commander. What gave you this inclination again?”

Krysta chewed on her lip. Hell, she didn’t even know why. The whole ordeal about Bray was just a mix-up. “Just a speculation, doctor.” She stood taller and squared her shoulders to regain control of the situation.

“Have you talked to Mordin? He may be preferable in this.” She warmly suggested to her.

“No.” Shepard shook her head firmly. “Sorry to waste your time, doctor.” She hurried out hearing the doctor call out to her in apologies. Pausing at the elevator, she saw Garrus and Zaeed hanging at the mess hall. She could overhear them exchanging war stories. She allowed her brown eyes to linger on Garrus. Right now, onboard their ship, he was the alien she knew the longest. He was a great comrade and saved her own skin on numerous missions when they were up against Saren. She considered him a friend, but nothing past that. Could it be possible to even have a relationship with another species? The thought never crossed her mind before. On Earth, those relationships were considered taboo, but not in space, it was normal like everything else. She just didn’t get it. Nothing about Garrus’ physical form enticed her. Not the way that Kaidan did. She remembered the first time they slept together. She hungered for him the days that followed for the little time she had left. Clearly, she had no sexual attraction to aliens, then why did Bray bother her? Why did he make her uncomfortable? She had to get some rest. Certainly, with their missions to come, the confusion would pass.

The secure credit chit touched his fingertips lightly in his pocket. That night was his night off and he was on his way to his normal destination. Nights off were a rarity for his line of work as a personal bodyguard for Aria T’Loak, but the pay was more than adequate and quite generous. Bray felt naked not wearing his normal entire, which consisted of his personally made armor that had modified kinetic barriers. However, his “civilian” attire would do tonight. He didn’t want any unwanted attention. Not everyone on Omega was a huge fan of Aria’s reign. She knew it and frankly did not care. Most nights, there would a haste in his step towards one of the most popular brothels on the station that housed mainly asari and a few female batarians to his liking. With his pay, he could afford one of the best girls for the night and still have plenty of leftover for other amusements. His apartment was paid for by Aria. In fact, she owned the complex that he resided in. All his food on his regular working days were on the house and the days to where he wasn’t at work, he knew which joints to hit up that gave him a privileged discount.
Tonight, was different. Subconsciously, he could feel his pace becoming slower. The trip was more of a routine than a desire. His mind was focused on other matters. Shepard’s recent arrival on the station bothered him. His encounters with her were anything, but pleasant. He could see the hatred and resentment in her eyes towards him. Was it to him personally? Or was it something darker? Yet, her true demeanor was guarded. It seemed as if her actions were merely for show. If so, who for? Her squad? Him? Her? He didn’t care for her one way or the other. Aria seemed to make a big deal of her arrival, but he didn’t understand why. Why did Council space issues concern her? They were in the Terminus Systems. Untouchable. Krysta seemed like any other merc he encountered, just more pompous from the Citadel. He had his fair share of dealings with all the merc groups on Omega when it came to discord regarding on how Aria handled them. The Blue Suns, the Eclipse, the Blood Pack and the Talons. They would puff out their chests and threaten bodily harm to him and his team to send as messages to T’Loak, but all were empty threats. None dared to act up on them and if Aria ever got a whiff of their plots; she would deal with them her own way. Just like she did to the Blue Suns when they decided to bring a dangerous enemy known as the Collectors to the station years ago. Their status on the station was knocked down and they were slowly regaining their foothold in rankings.

Stopping himself just blocks away from the brothel, he growled out loud in frustration. He just wasn’t in the mood tonight and now he stood there, frozen, deep in thought. He chewed his lip. He had to know more about Krysta. He had no love for humans and knew all the turmoil that their kind had placed upon his own species. Word got around, but he never pledged his loyalty to the Hegemony like many did after the attack on Torfan. Krysta did mention that place in one of her first interactions with him. Was she there? Was batarian blood on her hands just like she claimed? He needed more intel and knew where to get it, but it was risky. It seemed like he and her were symbiont. Constantly dancing on thin lines around each other, especially him to her, yet he wanted it again. His mind was made up. He turned to his right to head towards his new destination.

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After swiping his security badge, the door to their intel processing warehouse slid open and an olive skinned female salarian greeted him with a confused look plastered on her amphibious face. Her large eyes blinked at him. “Bray? This is unscheduled. Is something wrong?”

“No. I need the data you acquired on Commander Krysta Shepard on a datapad promptly. Aria needs to review it again.” He tried to not sound nervous as he flew by the seat by his pants on the dialogue.

“One sec,” Yutar scurried over to her terminal and picked up a datapad to hook up. “I’ll transmit it now. Should only take a few minutes.”

“Fine.” Bray looked around to make sure no one was really eyeballing him.

“My apologies for the confusion, Bray. I hardly did not recognize you without your armor.” Yutar commented as she worked.
“My night off…you know how it goes. When she calls, my ass better answer.” He muttered.

She giggled. “I understand that…almost done…ah, here we go.” She unhooked the pad and gave it to him with a smile. “Always a pleasure to serve.”

“Thanks. Carry on.” He stuffed the pad tightly underneath his arm and moved to the door. His heart began to beat rapidly. This may actually work.

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It was only when he reached his apartment that Bray allowed himself to breathe. The pad was still with him and as far as he knew, only really Yutar and the others knew he was there. Why would they squeal? As far as they knew, the request was authentic and there was no follow up on what went out since all requests were from Aria. The intel team knew which ones to trust and today Bray broke that trust. Placing the pad delicately on his couch, he moved over to his makeshift kitchen to grab him some ale. He needed something to calm his nerves. The worst part was over. Taking a sip and feeling the alcohol hit his body, he let out a sigh of relief and sat down on the couch, grabbing the pad. “Now, let’s see who you are really are, Shepard.”

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Hours later, Yutar approached Aria at her platform. An hour later after Bray left, Aria requested a status update on the plague on Omega. The team went to work and now Yutar personally came to give the news. She proudly handed the pad to her since the opportunity was significant to her and paused. Tonight, was her night! She had two times to work on Aria’s requests. She would show her how diligent she was. Aria looked up in confusion at the salarian who was standing there with a big grin on her face. “Yes?”

Yutar nearly fell over in embarrassment. “I hope the data is sufficient and hope everything came through on the Shepard file as well.” She stammered to explain her actions.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.” Aria’s puzzled face remained. “What Shepard file?”

The salarian’s jaw dropped. “What? Then he must have not been here yet. I’m sorry, I just assumed that- “She quickly spoke, trying to find her words.

Aria rolled her eyes. Sometimes the salarians’ fast talk path really annoyed her. “Slow the hell down. Who is he?” Alarm filled her voice.

“Well, Bray, mam. He-he came here hours ago and stated that you were asking for all the information we dug up on Krysta Shepard.”

Aria narrowed her eyes. “Leave me.” What the hell was Bray up to? It wasn’t like him at all to go behind her back. He knew better than to do so. She knew he had a few entanglements with Shepard while she was on the station, but what was the big deal? Not like she kicked his ass or anything. This perturbed and interested her at the same time. She decided to tuck this card away for now and use it when the time was right.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Krysta is dealing with the repercussions after Horizon. More of her ghosts are haunting her.

MASS EFFECT: SOLACE
CHAPTER 7

She could feel her hot breath pouring through her nose as she pumped her legs faster on the treadmill. Her brown eyes staring out into the dark abyss of space with thousands of stars staring right back at her. Sweat soaked her skin, dripping down her body into her sports bra and down her stomach to the lining of her workout pants. Her dog tags clanging against one another as each of her feet took a step on the conveyor belt. The machine’s timer was to keep track of her time and her vitals. Normally, she would glance down from time to time to see the readings, but today she ignored it. Her mind swirled with flashbacks from her past mission on Horizon. She relived each fight in her mind. The insect like faces of the Collectors staring back at her. Their eerie chattering as they took notice of her squad’s presence. The hellish scions that lurked at her. Their bulbous forms containing husks. This put a wrench into everything. The husks were used by the Reapers, repurposed human beings. How did the Collectors come about in obtaining these? Were the Collectors working with the Reapers? This was the first time she had to go up against them one on one and it nearly cost her life and her team’s life. Tali took a nasty hit in her environmental suit, but she assured Shepard that she would quickly administer antibiotics to dowse out any infections, but she may run a small fever during the ordeal. Chakwas would not clear her for active duty until they were certain that she would not be ill. Shepard couldn’t risk another hit to her teammate. The quarians were a fragile species as it was in their suits, and a puncture was notoriously deadly to them. Grunt also took a nasty hit from a scion that knocked down his shields and broke some of his armor. Despite the gash in his thigh, he growled at Krysta when she tried to check it out there. He shoved her away and said, “Krogans do not feel pain! I’m not weak, Shepard.” Krysta took a bad scrape to the side of her face from a husk swarm. Luckily, it was not deep enough to really leave a scar.

Then there was most painful hit of them all, her old comrade, Ashley Williams. She was stationed by the Alliance on Horizon. Somehow, the Collectors missed her when they were boarding what colonists they could gather to their vessel before Shepard and her team arrived. Her cold eyes glaring at Krysta as if she was an enemy standing before her. She would not believe that Krysta was herself since she was working for Cerberus despite her krogan squadmate and her old friend, Tali. Of all the people that Krysta thought that would sympathize with her position, she hoped it would be Ash. When she first met her, Ash had no love for aliens. She always placed humanity first, but the aliens they took with them on their journey grew on her. Ash was pained that Krysta was indeed alive and never contacted her. Not even the Alliance seemed to want Krysta back. One of Ashley’s final words on the colony were, “How do you think Kaidan would have taken this?” Krysta wanted to stand there and argue what she thought he would say, but deep down inside, even she was mixed about this. Kaidan had no love for Cerberus and would he have the same posture as Williams? She could almost see him staring before her beside Ash with the same guarded distrustful look. Maybe, her old teammate was right. Maybe, she wasn’t herself. That would explain a lot. Perhaps Cerberus
was just that skilled in whatever means they had to make Shepard pass all the scans to prove she was the original. What if she was someone else’s body with her memories manifested with extra Cerberus coding? “No…” She huffed from her mouth and ignored her burning quads and calves as she increased the speed. In her mind, she wanted to run away from all of this and she was on the treadmill.

“Damn, Shepard.” Jacob’s voice made her pause quickly from her intense workout. She hopped off the machine and wiped the sweat from her brow and neck.

“Jacob.” She dabbed her face with the towel. “What are you doing up so late?”

“I was going to ask you the same question. Your file said that you were hardcore, but I never expected a workout right after a mission.” The dark-skinned man chuckled. “You put my daily sit-ups and pushups to shame.”

“I needed to clear my head.” Krysta was not in the mood to have a friendly chat. She hoped her tone would deter him away, but he didn’t flinch.

“I heard that things down on Horizon got rough. I’m sorry about that.” He paused. “Not the kind of closure you were hoping for.”

“Ash moved on. I get it.” Her words were curt, but mostly to herself. She had to tell herself that Ash moved on and so did she.

“Speaking of closure, I wanted to say thank you for what you did for me. I still can’t believe my father did what he did, but he paid the price. Glad he pulled the trigger so I didn’t have to.”

“If he didn’t, then I would have.” Krysta placed the towel around her neck. She was aching for a shower. She could see the pain in his eyes from her statement. Jacob Taylor was one man she could almost trust with Cerberus. She tried not to be too stern with him as she grew to know him more. Not like how she was with Miranda.

“Anyways, I just wanted to say thanks.” He lingered in her doorway as if he was itching to say something else, but finally turned and left. She could see the hesitation in his eyes. Did he develop some sort of feelings towards her? Was he conflicted because no one really went out of their way like she did to help him? She gave a slight shrug and moved out of the starboard room. Even with him being a human, she didn’t think she could ever share any feelings towards him. It seemed like she was that way with everyone except for…Bray. Groaning loudly to herself, she moved towards the lab where Mordin Solus housed himself.

Without surprise, Mordin Solus was not sleeping like everyone else on the ship. He was using a microscope to observe something in a Petri dish. “Find anything useful?” She greeted him at the door.

“Shepard?” He looked up. His amphibious eyes wide by her appearance. “Is something the matter? Is this like a surprise check like in STG?”

“What? No.” Krysta shook her head. “Heading up to my cabin after my workout. Figured that I would stop by to see what you have discovered after leaving the Horizon.”

“Still going through what Tali managed to pick up down there for me. Quarians have a technique on scavenging data. Very impressed. Lots of tissue samples from the Collectors. Too bad, not a dead Collector.” He cleared his throat. “Would have been nice.”
“I’m sorry but I had a thousand husks on my ass.” She spat in annoyance. Their mission was to try to help the colonists and free who she could, not go around and cherry pick. She lost most of the colonists to the Collectors, despite chasing them away, it was not a great mission for her.

“Maybe next time. Still, what I have is very useful. Still analyzing. Hope to have data to share by morning.”

“You ever sleep?” Krysta lifted an eyebrow as she watched him feverishly work.

“Sometimes.” He moved over to pick up another dish. “Too much to study right now. Can sleep once I have composites.” He lifted his head from the microscope once again to look at her.

“Something else to discuss, Shepard?” This time, his tone was filled with frustration by her just standing there and not contributing anything.

She blinked by his question and she almost forgot the sole purpose of her coming there. “Just confused…Mordin, is there any technology out there for Cerberus to have to where it can change me?” She seemed grabbing at what to say. She didn’t want to divulge her entire love life to him. Was the main factor attributed to the fact that she couldn’t get over Alenko?

The salarian rubbed his chin as if he was trying to process what she asked. “Do you mean like clone? Yes…quite possible…. read paper once from a colleague on Surkesh. Risky…expensive. Cerberus has the funds.” He stopped suddenly and narrowed his eyes at her. “You a clone? No, no. Could be…maybe. Why?”

His talking made her head spin more. “Why? What? Are you asking me? I don’t know.”

“No., they had your body…could have had your DNA to clone…I could run tests to determine. Defer to my colleague.” He continued to ramble.

The idea of being a clone never occurred to her and now it made her upset even more inside. “I’m not being a damn sample, Mordin.” She sighed hard in frustration. “Just forget it. Focus on that.”

She turned on her heel and left the room to head to her cabin. Once she was in the elevator, she allowed herself to yell out in turmoil. “There’s nothing fucking wrong with me!”

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The next day, Kelly Chambers greeted her at her cabin door with her usual cheery face. “Good morning, mam. You had an email come in to your private terminal a few hours ago while you were sleeping. Should I transfer it to your terminal there?”

Krysta slept for over eight hours, but she felt like she only got three. She yawned and rubbed her eyes. “Sure, just pass it on. Who is it from?”

“The message is encrypted and there was no sender identified. However, the origin has been traced back to Omega.”

The sudden name alarmed her. “I’ll take it here.” She moved inside and shut the door again. She waited a few minutes before a chime came through indicating that the message was received. It read, “Heard you had merc experience. Can find you some work here when you return.”

“What the hell?” Krysta read the message over. It took her a few reads to catch on what she was referring to. First, she thought it was sent to the wrong person, or a hoax. But why would the sender take the time to encrypt it? “EDI?” She felt odd calling out to the AI from her room. “Can you try to figure out the sender of this last message?” It wasn’t like she didn’t trust Chambers to do her job, but she wanted to double check.
“The coding is complex, Shepard. I cannot pinpoint the exact IP, but the origin did come from Omega station.” The AI punctually replied. “Should I send a reply on your behalf?”

“No.” Krysta narrowed her eyes at the message. Only a select few knew about her past on Earth when she was younger. She ran into the wrong crowd and joined up with the Reds and a few merc groups for easy money. Never off world. Trying to straighten herself up, she enlisted with the Alliance. They knew her criminal record, but the offenses were minor and they needed bodies. With the finding of the mass relays and corporations funding several colonies, the Alliance was shorthanded and everyone was yelling for protection from raiders and a potential turian attacks. There was still fear even though the First Contact War ended with peaceful terms. She had no qualms to admit to her past and would defend herself, but it still bothered her. Her old dealings never really came light much and her most recent encounter was when she first became a Spectre. One of her old buddies from the Reds came to her and wanted to try to blackmail to do their dirty work. She dealt with it, but assumed that everything was closed now. Was it Aria? Had to be. Only she had the means to find this information and reach out to her without truly be detected. But what was it in for her? She was trying to blackmail her to do something for her? Most likely so. She really didn’t have time to go back to Omega and so what if the truth came out? It wasn’t like Cerberus would condemn her. She was valuable to their cause and as far as she was concerned, the Alliance was dead to her. They never bothered to reach out to her and there was no news on them trying to save the colonists. The colonies in the Terminus Systems were the ones being attacked and the colonists were warned about being out that far. She still couldn’t turn their back on them. Something was ominous about the Collectors. Especially with their possible ties with the Reapers.

Making her way down to the Forward Batter, she saw Garrus cleaning his sniper rifle. “Garrus, you have time to talk?”

“Sure. What is it?” He quickly moved up from the workshop table to greet his superior officer.

She handed him the datapad. “Just got this message from Omega. Take a look.”

He skimmed over the text and then looked up at her with confusion in his eyes. “I’m sure it’s a joke, Shepard.”

“I was a merc, Garrus.” She admitted. “Years ago, when I was on Earth. I was a teenager then. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing.”

“Threats. Just shake it off.” Garrus gave her the pad back. His mandible twitched. She could tell that he was debating on exploring her past further with her or not.

“The Alliance knows my file. They still took me and pushed me up the ranks. I earned every part of it.” Her voice grew in anger. Why was she trying to defend her mistakes?

“You are one of the best soldiers that I have come across.” Garrus nodded his head in agreement. “We all have our ghosts that haunt us, Shepard,” He said reassuringly. His voice grew dark as if he was hiding something of his own that he wished not to discuss at the present. Krysta made a mental note to discuss later. “Focus on our mission. We have thousands if not millions counting on us. What’s next?”

That’s what she liked about her turian compatriot. With his ex-military training like most turians, he knew what it was like to be a soldier. He knew how to reel her in. “Ilium. Our next dossier is an assassin there.”

“Assassin?” He tilted his head to ponder the idea. “Cerberus does have a very unique talent on finding suitable travel companions.” He cleared his throat. “I request that they board near Jack.”
This aroused a giggle from Krysta. “Yeah, try to get that through the cracks in the Alliance. Sometimes in order to win, we have to break a few rules.” She allowed a smirk to spread across her lips. “Cut some red tape.”

He grinned, sharing the past talk aboard the Normandy SR-1 and his days with C-Sec. “Why I followed you, Shepard and quit C-Sec. You showed me how to deal with Dr. Saleon. My way.”

“Want to come along to Ilium?”

“Sure, why not. Heard it’s like Omega, but more lavish. Who else going with us?”

“Maybe Kasumi?” Krysta tossed out for input.

“A thief on Ilium…do we really want to get arrested?” He pondered the idea with a soft chuckle.

“Fine…Grunt?”

“Fights?”

“Fights are fun.” Krysta grinned. “Okay…what about Mordin?”

“I’ll leave that up to you.”
Chapter 8: Undisclosed Desires

Chapter Summary

Krysta confronts Aria about the message she received.

Chapter inspired by "Undisclosed Desires" by Muse

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 8

“Kasumi?” Krysta paused at the steps just below the vendor floor to see the hooded woman browsing at a volus merchant’s kiosk.

“Shit…” She could hear Kasumi curse and then she vanished, leaving the volus merchant who just turned away for a second, utterly confused. His respirator breathed heavily as he walked around his designated area to see where the potential customer went. Seeing that the Spectre’s attention was on him, he glanced her way. “Earth clan.” He rasped. “Did you see where she went?”

“She’s good.” Garrus chuckled. Krysta elbowed him sharply in the side. Kasumi’s defiance frustrated her. Everyone onboard knew that docking at any port was not designated as shore-leave. They were on a mission and she ran the ship tightly.

“One of ours?” Samara, their newest member, asked her. She remained poised.

“Yes,” Krysta groaned in embarrassment. Come on. She figured that Kasumi was still in the vicinity, lurking about. Once they reached the hallway that would lead them to their docking bay, Shepard stopped again. “Kasumi, you there?”

A few seconds passed and then the master thief uncloaked herself about ten feet to her right. Majority of her face was hidden from her hood, but guilt was plastered all of it. “I guess I’m in trouble now, right?” She softly asked, rubbing her right arm. It was if she was a child being scorned by their parent.

Krysta ushered Garrus and Samara along to the Normandy before finally addressing her. “Damnit, Kasumi. Did I not make myself clear?” She could hear her own anger rising in her voice.

“You did…” Kasumi openly admitted. Her masked eyes turned towards the opening that led to the vendor floor. “I just never been to this place before. Heard tales about it. Keiji and I always talked about visiting here…. just never got around to it…” Her voice softened again as sadness crept in.

Kasumi and Krysta could relate to the same pain they were feeling regarding their lost loves. It wasn’t like their love interest was off at some distant planet or some bad breakup. They were dead and most likely, would never see them again. Krysta recalled Ash talking about the afterlife and Heaven. Krysta never got tuned in with Earthly religions. She knew about most of them, just never believed. She lived each moment for now. Defeated on the inside, Krysta sighed hard and rubbed the corner of her eyes with her fingers. “Just stay on the ship unless you are on an assignment. Is that
understood?"

“Yes, mam.” Kasumi paused. “Should I salute?”

“No..just. Never mind.” Krysta moved towards the Normandy where Garrus and Samara were waiting for her return. She never met their eyes.

“I never expected Cerberus to hire a known thief.” Samara finally broke the silence as they walked into the ship’s entrance. “My code would have compelled me to bring her to justice. Since I have sworn an oath to you Shepard, I would not do so at this time.” She moved ahead of them to get acclimated with the ship.

Garrus and Krysta exchanged silent looks. “She’s a very serious woman.” The turian muttered to her.

“Shepard, where should I take board?” Samara called to her.

“Go see Kelly Chambers. She will get your assignment.”

“Come see before we take off. I need to discuss my quest with you.” The asari moved to where the Yeoman was stationed.

Krysta turned to look at Joker who was turned around in his chair, watching Samara. “Stick your tongue back in, Mr. Moreau.” She teased.

“I-I don’t know what you are talking about.” The pilot coughed.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Kasumi left the ship?” She returned to the previous issue at hand.

He looked back her in confusion. “Why would I? She said she received a call from you asking her to meet up with you.”

Shepard rolled her brown eyes. “Of course, she did. Next time, clarify everything with me.”

He still looked confused. “Uh…what happened?”

“Nothing.” Krysta moved towards the CIC where was Garrus waiting at the elevator to head back down to the Forward Battery. She quickly moved to him. “What do you think about Liara?”

“Too bad that she’s stuck there. Would be nice to have another friendly face onboard.” Garrus moved his head from side to side to stretch his neck.

“You think she’s over her head with the Shadow Broker?”

“Possibly. I’m sure she’s fine.” Garrus allowed her to enter the elevator first. “Guess she’s moved on for right now.”

“Story of my life.”

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“Hell yeah. Omega. I missed this place.” Jack cheered excitedly as she exited the Normandy with Krysta and Samara. Her eyes were masked by her metal silver toned sunglasses.

“We are here for Samara, Jack.” Krysta firmly reminded her.
“Yeah, yeah. I know that. Don’t get anal on me, Shepard. I thought you were cool.” Jack’s mood quickly dropped.

“We should hit Afterlife first and talk to Aria. She keeps tabs on everyone. If your daughter came here, Samara, then Aria may know about it.” Krysta offered her comrade.

Samara nodded her head. “I agree. We should go there first.”

Krysta made a beeline to the massive club. She didn’t disclose that she had other intentions too with Aria. She didn’t forget the message she received from Omega. She wanted to confront her with that as well. For now, she would not make it her main mission to her teammates nor Aria T’ Loak. She wanted to see the pirate queen squirm. As they maneuvered around the crowd that was waiting out in the hallway to the center platform, she noticed that Jack shoved her way closer to her. “When we get up here, Shep, show me which one he is.”

“Who?”

“Bray. I want to see what he looks like.”

Krysta tensed up. This again? She didn’t want to deal with him. She almost forgot he would also be here. A part of her was jealous recalling their card game and Jack’s comment that she would have sex with him if given the chance. Did she really mean it or was it just to get under her skin? She didn’t know with this ex-convict. Given her past, it could have been the former or maybe both. Not like Krysta cared. They were not an item and clearly, they hated one another. She ignored her request and made her way along.

“What are you doing here?” Anto, the other batarian that they encountered before on Aria’s payroll, stopped them at the steps that led up to where T’Loak was housed.

“I need to speak with Aria.” Krysta quickly sidestepped around him to gain access to the steps. The startled batarian moved to stop her, but was shoved to the side by Jack.

Hearing the disruption below, Bray quickly moved over to the top of the stairs to see Krysta and two others coming up. He felt his heart stopped as he saw her approach. What was she doing here? He glanced nervously at Aria and then back. It was too late to really warn her so he held his assault rifle towards them. “Stop right there.”

“Out of the way, Bray.” Krysta glared at him. “I’m not in the mood.”

Jack laughed as she eyed him. “So, this is Bray?” She nodded her head side to side as if she was debating something. “Yeah, sure why not.”

Bray scratched his head in confusion. “What?”

“Shepard, nice to see you again.” Aria’s voice cooed over, breaking up the exchange. Krysta felt a sigh of relief exit her mouth. She dared not to look at the batarian again as she approached the ruler of Omega.

“Aria.”

“Interesting companions you brought this time.” She eyed her comrades carefully. “I don’t like all this attention here so be brief. What do you want?” Her voice was sharp like a razor blade.

“I thought Omega didn’t care about me.” Shepard played into her earlier words.
“And it doesn’t.” Aria narrowed her eyes.

“My friend here is tracking an Ardat-Yakshi. We believe she may be here.” Krysta pointed over to the Justicar.

“I knew it…nothing leaves a body so cold. A young girl was murdered recently, pretty thing. She had an apartment nearby. I would look there first.”

“You knew about it already?” Krysta lifted an eyebrow.

“The murder was suspicious, but you just clarified my fear. Is there something else?” Aria’s facial movements were neutral. Krysta found it hard to read her. She began to doubt that perhaps she didn’t send that message, but if she didn’t, who did? What purpose would they have? Aria didn’t seem unsettled at all that she returned to Omega, more annoyed than anything else. It didn’t make sense to send the message if she didn’t want her back on the station. She had to clear the air. Reaching into her pocket, she retrieved the datapad that contained the email and tossed it on the couch next to her.

“I received this a few weeks ago. Encrypted, but traced back to here. I believe only you would have the capability to retrieve my file, so come clean.”

Aria nonchalantly picked up the datapad to skim the information and then tossed it aside casually. Krysta noticed from her peripheral vision that Bray, who was standing to her right, seemed to be tenser than before. Was he anticipating a firefight? Bray held his breath. He never thought Krysta would confront Aria with his email. If she found out that he was the one that overstepped his boundaries…the asari’s response, floored him. “So, what of it? I had to see who you really were.” A small smirk formed at the corner of her lips.

Bray’s jaw dropped and he fidgeted with his weapon. Why would Aria admit to something that she didn’t do? Did she already know about what he did? He could feel the beads of sweat forming on his brow.

“I have nothing to hide,” Krysta hissed. “I have dealt with my demons. I do not have to take threats from you.” She moved down the steps with the others in tow, shoving her way past Bray who was still frozen in place.

Aria remained quiet, sipping on her drink for a few moments after the group left till her blue eyes careened over to where he stood. The smirk on her lips faded. He gulped. He knew what that look meant. “Bray, we need to speak in private.” She stood up from her couch. Not saying anything else, she moved to the closest back room. Those rooms were held for private matters that she didn’t want to disclose to anyone else. With this being a security issue, he knew she wanted to deal with it privately. It was a sign of weakness. If word spread that something like this happened, others would take advantage of it. She had to show her power at all times. After the door closed, he was the first to speak up. “Aria…look.” He stumbled for his words as he tried to find a believable explanation for his action. He couldn’t explain to himself why he transmitted the message nor why he went to great lengths to find all the dirt he could find on her. Was he obsessing on getting back at her for her hostile interaction with him or was it something else? Did he secretly want to see her again? For what purpose?

Aria’s eyes were focused on the datapad that Krysta gave her. “Damnit, Bray. You know what kind of shit you are in. What kind of games are you playing?” She finally lifted her head to look at him. Her face filled with betrayal. “Did she really get under your skin? Shepard doesn’t mean anything to me. Omega doesn’t care about what kind of war she’s fighting. The Collectors are dangerous and I want no part of that, especially here.”

“It won’t happen again.” Bray managed to respond. He held his breath.
“You are relieved for today.” She waved him away. “Without pay. And if you ever do this again, I will personally ram a singularity of your batarian ass.”

Relieved that he could leave, unscathed; Bray quickened his steps out of the club, appearing to be angry for show. Everyone knew that any private matter with Aria was never good, but deep down inside, he was relieved that she covered his ass. He didn’t understand why. Most likely, she didn’t want to lose her position and admitting that she didn’t do such an act would show she had weakness in her security. A flaw. Something she never showed to anyone. Strike two for him. He dared not to cross the line again if he could help it. Aria could have easily turned him to the eezo mines deep down below. Physical labor was not his forte.

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A hard slap on his back nearly made Bray spit out his beer. He snapped around to growl at whoever the offender was, and saw a snarky look on Moklan’s face. The fellow batarian sat down at the table across from him. “Heh…heard Aria tossed you out today.” He took a gulp from his own beer and wiped off his mouth with the back of his hand. A satisfying burp escaped his lips. “Sanak took your post. Tough luck.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow.” Bray firmly reminded him as the statement didn’t bother him. The VIP club was exclusive to the elite on Omega and a few of Aria’s people with privileges. Bray liked going there to unwind sometimes to avoid all what he called the “lowlife scum.” He liked seeing the looks of the citizens who yearned for a chance to step inside those doors.

“Sure. Keep on and you will be at the bottom near me.” Moklan chuckled as he took another swig of his drink. He was one of the newest members to Omega and Aria’s workforce. He mostly was tasked to filter out newcomers and fetch those who held T’Loak’s interest. “What the hell did you do?”

Bray scowled. “I don’t want to talk about it.” It had been hours since he was dismissed, but he kept thinking about the encounter with Krysta there in the club. Where did she go? What the hell was an Ardat-Yakshi doing on the station? Knocking back another drink, his eyes caught a patron coming inside the club. Her appearance made him this time spit out his drink and all over Moklan. “What the fuck?!”

Moklan scooted back from the table quickly, dowsed in the beer. “What the hell is your problem?!?”

He snarled loudly.

“Quiet!” Bray snapped. “Go away.” He tossed him one of his chits. “Go buy you a few more.”

Moklan snatched the chit unhappily. “You are acting weird, Bray.” He continued to grumble under his breath as he made his way over to the bar counter.

Bray felt his heart racing as he watched Krysta move deeper into the club. She was dressed not in her usual armor, but regular commoner clothes. Her usual hairstyle was changed to where the hair was down and more free flowing along the mid of her back. A few clubgoers eyed her suspiciously before returning to their conversations. Her new appearance was very striking. Not like he had a thing for humans before and never really cared for it. His usual preference type was asari and female batarians. Krysta seemed almost vulnerable without her armor. She moved about the crowd, focused on whatever task she had. What was she doing here? It was if she was looking for someone. There was no way it could have been. No one knew he was visiting the club. Not even Aria. Luckily for him, his table was near the back so he was hidden for the most of part. She moved to the opposite side of the club and homed in where two turians were chatting on a couch. She paused and started a conversation up with them. Was it random? Bray watched on with interest. Suddenly, the two men stood up to attack her. She quickly dodged the first one’s assault and did a quick low swift kick,
tripping him to the ground. The other moved towards her, she sidestepped then grabbed his arm, twisting it to an unnatural position and flipping him over on top of the other. This aroused a chuckle out of Bray as he enjoyed the show. “She’s not bad.”

Both turians yielded to her and she moved on to the nearby bar. Moklan took note of what happened and moved away from her. Bray found his chance and quickly made his way over. She was propped up against the counter, enjoying her drink when he took her side. “Causing fights everywhere you go?”

Surprised, she glanced his way and then downed her shot and shook her head as the alcohol burned her throat. “What are you doing here, Bray?”

“Would ask you the same question.”

“Aria finally let her pet out?” She spat.

He eyed her carefully. “Aria didn’t send that message.” He admitted softly.

“You did?” She finally turned to give him her full attention. It took only a few seconds from her facial expression to turn from confusion to anger. “You bastard…”

“I wanted to know what I was up against.” A half-way lie.

“Are we enemies?” Krysta spat back.

“We are damn not friends.” Bray retorted. “You put a gun to my head, what you would call me?”

“Lucky.” She motioned the barkeep for a refill on her drink.

“A human Spectre…you’re not a saint.” Bray pressed further.

“Careful. I’ll knock you on the ground too.” Krysta hissed lowly.

“You came here to pick fights?” Bray observed. “Having a rough day, too?”

She didn’t know why this batarian was so interested in her. He obviously shared no love towards her, but why did it seem wherever she went on the station, he was there. Coincidence? She glanced back towards the crowd. Dealing with him, she almost forgot why she was there. It wasn’t for leisure. Samara was outside, waiting her to exit with her daughter. There were plenty of asari about. Which one was Morinth? “Look, I’m looking for someone and it’s not you.” She moved to place her back against the counter with her drink in her hand. She had to remain casual and it was hard with him around. She needed to get in the limelight; to draw Morinth out like any other predator.

“You a dancer?” Bray inquired.

She ignored the question at first and noticed the song changing over to a faster beat pace. The club lit up with cheers and more patrons went to the dance floor. That was it! She had to go there. But she had to look like she was not desperate. The chase for Morinth was what excited her, Samara had explained. There was only option…and the idea made her nervous. “You a dancer?”

The question threw him for a loop. “What?”

“I’m going out there. If you want to get out of your grave, then follow me. I need you.” She placed her drink on the counter and made her way out to an open spot on the floor.

The request or demand really caught Aria’s bodyguard off. His boots felt frozen in place. He never
really bothered to dance. Not his interest. He didn’t know what Shepard was up to, but it was all a
ruse. A part of him wanted to stay back and let her figure out what she needed to get done while
another part of him wanted to get out there. His brown eyes never left her body as she shook her hips
with the beat of the music along with everyone else. She laughed and seemed for once to be happy.
“Screw it.” He finished off his drink and set out to the dance floor. He took to her side and moved
along with her own movements. With each beat, he felt his body inching closer. A lot closer than
most partners out there. He felt like he was in a trance, captivated by her and the music.

Krysta was shocked that Bray came over. The batarian had skills despite his guarded form. She was
no ideal dancer and rarely had time for such a thing, but she could keep up with majority of the
crowd. A part of the group formed near the DJ kiosk where a salarian was working the tunes. Just
where the hell was Morinth? Was she even here? Was her dancing with Bray for nothing? A part of
her didn’t want the moment to pass. What the hell was happening? She noticed that the batarian was
close to her, but his eyes evaded hers. When she was no nasty to him, he had no duty to help her out,
but here he was. Her thoughts were interrupted as a drunk human male bumped into her hard from
the back, nearly knocking her over. “Hey!” She growled at him.

The older gentleman whirled around to look at her, absent of an apologetic expression. “Watch it,
bitch. I was here.” He griped.

Before she could gather dark energy to light this guy up, she a saw quick blur as Bray moved around
her and delivered a hard punch straight in the guy’s drunken face. The man stumbled backwards and
fell straight on his ass. Dancers dispersed nearby, clearing the area in alarm. The guy rubbed his
swollen jaw and wiped the blood from his busted lip. His friend who was standing nearby, looking
just as intoxicated, lumbered towards them. “You asshole!” He staggered towards Bray. “You can’t
do that to my friend!”

“Back off.” Krysta gathered dark energy and delivered a biotic push, hard enough to make traction.
The man was shoved by the sudden burst of energy a good twenty feet before slamming into a table.

The first male finally found his footing and stood back up to square off with Bray once more. “I hate
your kind! You four-eyed freaks!” He screamed.

Looking over to her right, Krysta noticed an asari sitting at a table by herself, looking on the
disruption with interest. “Morinth…” Krysta quickly glanced back at Bray to see him still fighting off
with the drunk, but seemed like he could handle himself. This was her chance! She had to keep
Morinth focused on her. She moved away from the crowd to act as if she was leaving the club.

Bray took a nasty hit to the right side of his face before delivering a hard blow that knocked the wind
out of his opponent. Feeling his cheek burning, he looked around for Krysta. There was no sign of
her anywhere. A krogan nearby saw him looking around and approached him. “If you are looking
for your date, she just left with an asari. Tough luck,” He chuckled.

Bray exhaled hard through his nostrils. “She wasn’t my date.” He left the club in more frustration
than he walked in with. He was frustrated in more ways than one. He had to speak with her again. If
she drew out the Ardat-Yakshi, would she even survive? He silently hoped that she would.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Krysta is stopped at the markets on Omega. Will she ever face her own demons?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
Chapter 9

Krysta paused at the steps that led down to the markets of Omega. The path was not a direct route to the Normandy, but she figured to browse one more time to make sure there was nothing else she needed to pick up from the station before they departed. Samara remained quiet at her side, eyeing their surroundings. “You go on to the Normandy. I need to check something out.” Krysta took a side glance to the asari justicar.

“Understood, Commander.” Samara did not hesitate on the order as she moved to head down the hallway to their right that would take her to the docking port.

Moving quickly down the steps, the smell of food being cooked nearby by street vendors was thick with a mixture of appetizing and putrid. The aromas were so combined, that it was hard to tell which vendor had the one that seemed the ideal choice to eat. One cook was a burly brownish krogan who had one good eye, accompanied by two vorcha and the other was manned by three salarians. Even though she was hungry, Krista decided it was best for her to wait until she returned to the Normandy to have their own chef prepare something. She didn’t want to end up in the medical ward with some unidentifiable stomach poisoning. Her almond colored eyes moved towards where the familiar batarian street vendor known as Marsh was working behind the counter. She remembered when she browsed the shops on her initial arrival that he had some of the best items to choose from. Hilariously, he even offered digital magazines of Fornax. She was tempted to buy a few to hand out around the Normandy, but decided not to at the time. She needed to keep her creds on her upgrades to her ammo and armor. Marsh flashed his stained sharp incisors as she walked up to the kiosk. “You’re back? Must have seen something you liked.”

“You still have that scope at that discount price?” Krysta tapped on the kiosk’s screen to browse the catalog.

“One left…price was going to go up.” He smirked again. “You know how it goes.”

“What if I purchased some ammo as well?” Krysta countered. “I know Harrot had some on sale. I was going to go there, but I would rather buy from you.”

“Done.” Marsh chuckled. “I’ll get the item from the back, human. Keep looking.”

“You run a hard bargain, Marsh.” Krysta playfully called to him as she continued to eye the items he had in his stock.

Suddenly, the click of a pistol behind her head, made her tense up. She slowly held out her hands to show that she was not going to for her own weapon. She couldn’t see her would be attacker. “What
the hell do you want? Can I not shop?” She could see a few patrons fleeing the area while other vendors watched on worriedly.

“How does it feel, Spectre?” Bray’s familiar voice was cocky. “For once, I have the upper hand.”

“Do you?” Krysta tossed out as she slowly turned on her heel to face him. “I’m a biotic, remember?” She debated if she should exhibit her power or not.

A tiny scowl crossed Aria’s bodyguard’s face. She had a point. However, trying to catch her off-guard was his sole purpose of the meeting. He had to get something off his chest. He had to know.

“What the hell did you pull back there?” His words were masked with pain.

“What?”

“The VIP club.” He motioned towards the club’s door with his head. “Your profile shows that clearly you do not like my kind- “

“Do not like is an understatement.” She flatly interjected coldly. She tried her best to act like he didn’t break her guard when he was around.

“Fine. Hate.” He corrected himself. “After Torfan, they had you screened. You massacred batarians. You sent your team in to their demise without hesitation to make sure no batarians came back alive as well. Why dance with one?”

He seemed very hurt and it totally threw her off. Her hard stance faded. She locked her eyes with his chocolate colored ones. “I had to lure Morinth out. The Ardat-Yakshi that Aria knew about.”

Hearing murmuring as bystanders gossiped trying to comprehend on the interaction with two famed people, Bray became uncomfortable. He grabbed her arm. “Come with me.” She didn’t fight as she let him lead them towards one of the back alleys out of sight and far away from prying ears.

“You used me.” Bray clenched his fist. He couldn’t figure out why deep inside he was so troubled by all of this.

“The war is coming with the Collectors.” Krysta angrily snapped. “I’m here to help humanity. I don’t give a damn about Omega. Aria is not going to help me, so there’s no point in coming back.” She felt her chest becoming tight and moved towards the alley’s entrance to head back to her ship.

“Wait.” He quickly grabbed her wrist, jerking her back to him. Krysta stumbled to find her step and before she could pull away, she felt his lips on hers, pressing deeply, filled with emotion and fire. The total action was unexpected and she was internally conflicted that she didn’t pull away nor return the same affection.

He moved away and his grip on her wrist loosened. His eyes stayed on hers. His heart was pounding. Her facial expressions were so masked that he couldn’t determine how she felt towards him. “Here’s one batarian that doesn’t hate you.”

His words were so genuine and soft that they melted inside Krysta. She seemed frozen in place like she was struck by cryo ammo. “Bray…” She chewed her lip and then finally found her footing. “I-I need to head back.” She forced herself to move out of the alley; daring herself not to look back in his direction. What was going on? Her head spun as if she was in a daze. Something happened so fast like a blur! This was not happening! It couldn’t be! Not now! What did it mean? Was it some cruel fate from repercussions about what happened on Torfan? Was he playing her? He did admit that he knew her file and she had disdain towards his species.

“Hey, Commander. Glad you are back.” Joker stopped him from where he sat in his chair as she
cleared the ship’s entrance. “You were taking so long that I was about to send a search party.”

Krysta sternly glared at him. “Leave me the hell alone, Joker. Let’s just get the hell off this station.”

“Uh…sure…” Joker was thrown off by her demeanor and whirled around in his chair to address the controls. He huffed under his breath and switched over to the Forward Battery’s intercom. “Garrus?”

A few seconds later, Garrus replied, “I’m here, Joker. What do you need?”

“Nothing. Fair warning. Shepard’s back and she’s in total bitch mode.”

“I guess Sidonis can wait.” Garrus muttered in sheer disappointment.

“Hah. Perfect timing. She will be looking to kill someone.”

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“Personal log entry 345.02. I am still debating about Krysta. Heh. Never thought I would develop personal feelings for a superior officer. Then again, she’s very easy on the eyes, so it’s hard not to. She’s so hard to read. She was stern with me about what happened on Eden Prime. I put her life in danger…I’m such an idiot…I thought we lost her after she was hit by that beacon. Ash told me to let it go. My first impression and I blew it. I’ll see after Feros. Kaidan out.” Krysta wiped the tears from her eyes as she sat at her private terminal in her cabin that evening, replaying audio logs that Kaidan had on the Normandy. She remembered when she first was given access to these after his demise. She would listen to each one every night and cry herself to sleep. She never really reached for them since her resurrection by Cerberus, yet, she longed for them now.

“Kaidan…you bastard…why did you volunteer to arm the nuke?” Krysta fought the hot tears in her eyes. What was she saying? If he didn’t, then it would fall upon Ash. Was she that conceded that she would gladly give up Ash’s life for Kaidan’s? No, Ash was a good friend; a distant one now, but still a friend. Defeated, she moved her finger over to touch for the next entry, but paused when she heard her cabin’s door chime. “Enter.”

Garrus stepped in and homed in on her where she was sitting at her desk. “Am I interrupting, Commander?”

“No..I was just…scrolling through some files to think on where to go next…” She quickly closed out the log archives and turned off her terminal. Not a complete lie to her turian comrade. Just different context. She was really thinking about where she went now with Bray.

“I know you have been through a lot lately…dealing with everyone’s problems…. but maybe this fight is really taking a toll on you.” He propped up against the wall next to her with his arms crossed. “Is there something bothering you, Shepard? You haven’t been yourself since we left Omega the first time around.”

She cracked a weak smile. Leave it up an ex C-Sec officer to use his investigative skills on the situation. “Just want this war to end.”

“Well, take a break for yourself too.”

“The yeoman said you received some news while I was gone?” Krysta recalled Kelly flagging her down when she arrived back to the Normandy that day.

“Yes. I sent some feelers out on Sidonis. The turian I told you about that betrayed my men. The man responsible in locating him is named Fade. He’s on the Citadel. Next time we go- “

“Joker?” Krysta interrupted him to signal her pilot through the ship’s intercom system.
“Yes, Commander?”

“Set a course for the Citadel at once.”

“Roger.”

Garrus shook his head. “It can wait, Shepard. You’re sure in a good state of mind to deal with this?”

“Thought you wanted revenge.” She countered as she stood from her desk.

“Are you sure?” Her sudden change really floored him.

“I feel like shooting someone. May as well be him.”
Once again Krysta found herself in the dark. Her arms were restrained in the small confinement. She had no idea where she was. She could hear wails of pain and agony in the distance. Their ghostly voices seeping through where she was. She struggled to break free from her coffin, but it was to no avail. She debated if she should cry for help or not. Who was lurking on the outside? Did they know she was there? Then she heard his voice. “Shepard!” It was Kaidan! Was it a sick joke? She didn’t call out and held her tongue. She listened closely. “Shepard! Hang tight! I’m coming!” It was him! Logic did not matter to her.

“Shepard!” She yelled out his name. “I’m here!”

There was silence and then she could hear someone unlocking wherever she was. Light struck her face and she pulled away to guard the brightness from damaging her eyes. Giving time for her retinas to adjust, she lifted her head to look up. She could only see the ceiling of her location that resembled an insect hive. Somewhere familiar, yet unknown. She tried to move, but could not still. “Kaidan, I’m stuck. Where are you?”

There was an eerie silence. Even the wails disappeared. Seconds later, the horrific modified version of a Prothean known as a Collector leered down at her. It’s glowing yellow highs that seethed at its seams made the room lighter. “Assuming control.” The Collector General’s voice boomed at her through the possession of its pawn. “You will know pain, Shepard.”

She cringed and tried to move. “No!” Jolting out of the hellish nightmare, Krysta found herself half naked in her tank top with her dog tags clanging together. Sweat covered her entire body and her chest heaved. Realizing that she was back in the safety of her cabin upon the SR-2, she pressed her forehead against the palm of her hand and took slow deep breaths to calm herself down. Glancing over to her holo clock, she noticed she only been asleep for three hours. It had been over ten hours since they departed from the Collector vessel: The trap that the Illusive Man was aware of. He deemed it was necessary for the overall outcome of their war against the Collectors, but in the process, she risked the lives of her Normandy crew and her squadmates: Thane and Garrus. For some reason, the Collectors wanted her. Was it for some vial test that they wanted to perform like they did upon their own kind? Was she fated to have the same fate as the Protheans? To be repurposed by the Reapers? No. She would die before she befell that fate. Slipping on her workout pants, she moved out of her cabin to stroll the halls for a walk to clear her mind. She dared not to go back to sleep. She was tired of fighting them for the day.

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The sound of laughter coming from the starboard side of the ship aroused her curiosity and she paused in the hallway before returning to the elevator on the Mess level. She recognized one of the voices to be Zaeed. Coming through the room’s doors, she found Jack, Grunt, Garrus and Zaeed
around the poker table, playing a round of cards. Everyone stopped in their conversation and looked upon her. “Shep!” Jack smiled cheesily. “What’s up, girlfriend?”

“Can’t sleep either?” Krysta hid the fact that she was a bit jealous that she wasn’t invited to this game.

“Try to fend off mercs for days…you will lose your taste for sleep.” Garrus boasted as he shifted through his cards.

“Sleep is for the weak.” Grunt huffed.

“Want to join the next hand?” Zaeed asked her. “We have another chair.”

“That’s okay.” Krysta sat down at the table to observe. “I’ll just hang out.”

“Shep’s afraid she will lose again.” Garrus teased her with a smirk.

“Come on, Shep. Don’t let Garrus get you like that.” Jack nudged her with an elbow. “Besides he’s not winning.”

“Who is?” Krysta looked around to sort through the piles of chips.

“Me.” Zaeed chuckled with a laughter. “You got any cigars on board?”

“Smoking is not permitted, Mr. Massani.” EDI interjected with her cold metallic voice. Zaeed responded with a middle finger.

“Life is good, Shep. I haven’t had this much fun in years.” Jack replaced three of her cards. “I handled Aresh.”

“I dealt with Sidonis. He got his at the end.” Garrus nodded his head.

“And I killed Santiago…damn batarian loving bastard.” Zaeed grumbled as he folded.

“You out?” Jack was shocked by the ex-merc’s action. “Don’t speak too ill about batarians…remember, Krysta likes one.”

Krysta glared coldly. “I do not.” She thought she would finally be rid of Omega and not have to deal with whatever confliction she had with Bray.


“We are heading to Tuchanka as we speak, Grunt.” Krysta assured him soothingly. She wondered just how safe it was to have Grunt on the ship right now with him pacing around and threatening to blow up something.

“Who is going with you and Grunt?” Garrus asked. She knew that he wanted to get out of the ship even though he endured their previous fight against the Collectors.

“Mordin.” Shepard replied matter-of-factly. She already thought about this before she told Joker to put in the coordinates. Mordin had a colleague that went missing on Tuchanka. He wanted to try to find him before the Krogan tore him apart. Salarians were not a welcome sight on the Krogan homeworld. It was completely suicidal and even crazy for her to be carting one along. However, in order to keep everyone focused, they had to tie up loose strings. She had dealt with most of her team so far. If anyone strayed to deal with their own issues, then their war against the Collectors and the
Reapers would mostly fail. She came this far and she wasn’t about to give up the fight so easily. She just prayed that no more colonists’ lives would be sacrificed in the process.

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“Shepard, you ever seen a varren fight?” Wrex asked as they strolled along Clan Urdnot’s encampment.

“No. Not say that I have.” Krysta looked around in the desolation that surrounded her. There were no bright lights, water fountains or flowers like one would find on the Citadel. Instead, there was rumble upon rumble with fire pits. Very nomadic. She enjoyed finding herself once again in the company of her old friend and teammate, Urdnot Wrex. He did well for himself since they parted ways before the Normandy was destroyed. He took it upon himself to return to his homeworld and find a way to rally the clans together, well most of them and work for a common goal: to grow the Krogan to their once renowned glory.

Wrex chuckled, “There’s a fighting pit nearby. Want to go?”

Krysta scrunched her face at the ideal of two warring dog-like species going at each other. She knew it was a Krogan tradition, but nothing she could stomach. “I’ll pass.” She had to remind herself that her business there was not for leisure. “About Maelon’s data that we salvaged, Mordin says he will focus on curing the genophage once we have dealt with the Collectors. I couldn’t destroy it, no matter how barbaric his experiments were.”

Wrex’s red left eye panned over to where from where he walked beside her after her statement; he nodded his head. “I trust you, Shepard.” His words were not affirmation, but more in line with a bottom line warning. If she crossed him, then there would be hell to pay. He went on as if he was reading her mind. “I didn’t at first, even at Virmire. You went to great lengths to assist me in getting my family armor back. It’s a piece of crap, but it meant something to me. I will never forget that.” His thunderous steps stopped and she followed suit. He then turned to directly look at her. “I would have never thought a human would care what happens to the Krogan. The Turians and the Salarians don’t and the Asari have made no efforts.”

“Mordin is a Salarian.” She corrected him gently.

“He was part of STG and was the reason why we are struggling to begin with.” He lowered his voice.

“He wants to redeem himself.”

“He better.” Wrex turned to look back towards where the rest of his clan was and sighed hard. “It’s tough to keep the clans working together. I hope to get more female clans to come over. We need all the fertile females that we can get to make our clan even stronger. I don’t want them to have the same fate of those that endured the experiments like Clan Weyrloc did. They are idiots.”

“They were desperate…wanting to survive.” Krysta replied sadly as she thought back to the deceased females they encountered when they went into the hospital.

“I’m doing a lot for you, Shepard. I’m allowing a Salarian, one of our hated enemies, to roam around freely. If I didn’t, he would have been dead as soon as he got off your shuttle and fed to the varren. I’ll make sure Grunt gets the rite soon. We need him on Clan Urdnot.”
This allowed Shepard to smile. “Thanks, Wrex. You know we will have to have a reunion once this is over with. I miss you. I need you on the Normandy. Like it used to be.”


“Maybe you can get her to join in too.” Krysta urged playfully, but deep down inside she was serious. She wanted her old squad there. She trusted them. They went through a lot with Saren and they survived. All, but Kaidan.

“Where you heading next?” Wrex’s question broke up her muse.

Krysta wasn’t sure. Her mind scrambled to go over her rough agenda she worked on the night before. She always liked to be prepared and know what their plan of action was. Tali came to her a few nights ago regarding disturbing news that she received from the Admiralty Board. Her name was in the dirt and she desired to go there to set things straight. She was frazzled by the accusation that she may have done something that would have put the Flotilla in critical danger. Her tender heart made her the kind of person or Quarian that would put others in front of her own needs. The Flotilla was her family. Krysta learned a lot from her while she was on her pilgrimage. Shepard would have never thought years ago that she would befriend a quarrian. “Bail out Tali.”

“Lots of gunfire?” The krogan Clan leader perked up.

“I hope not.”
Chapter Summary

Aria doesn't like how Bray has changed lately. Krysta is preparing to go through the Omega 4 Relay.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 11

The lumbering krogan paced around at Aria’s booth as his arms stretched out to visualize his tale. “I stood against the Blood Pack with my krantt. We were outnumbered. A good fight.” Patriarch boasted proudly as he turned to look back at his audience: Aria T’Loak and two of her handmaidens. A few dancers lingered nearby, but their attention was not focused on the defeated krogan nor were Aria’s bodyguards that stood a few feet away from the private booth.

Aria shook her head as she listened in and rolled her eyes. “Patriarch, your old age is making your memory fail you. Shepard bailed your sorry ass out.” Her tone flattened, “Not to my liking, of course.”

The blue clathe krogan eyed her suspiciously before turning completely to squarely face her. “You are older than me, Aria.” He corrected with a snark. “A pity that the assassins didn’t take your trophy away.”

Aria played his comment off lightly. “Come now, Patriarch. I enjoy keeping you around and hearing your…. fictional stories.”

“My tales of greatness.” He corrected her.

“Then why don’t you tell the one where I took Omega right out from under you.” She grinned devilishly. Glancing back, she noticed that Bray remained in solitude. He had the same demeanor for several days. Not his usual self and it was starting to really piss her off. “Isn’t that right, Bray?” She cooed over to him to catch his attention.

“Huh?” Bray looked back, clearly, absent-minded about what dialogue just took place between the two ex-foes. “Yeah, Aria.” He lied.

This irked Omega’s ruler. Uncrossing her legs, she snapped her fingers to flag one of the dancers over to where she sat. The young maiden Asari squatted down on the platform that was inches above from where they sat. “Yes, Aria?” Her voice quivered. Bray figured she was probably new and didn’t want to fail her new boss.

“Vo’me, is it?” Aria looked up at her. She made it a habit to know each of her employees’ names.

“Yes, it is.”

“Take Bray over to the nearest bar and provide him some company. He appears lonely.” She looked at the Batarian as she spoke. She could see him freeze up by the order.

Jumping down, Vo’me walked over to where Bray was to wait on him to walk with her. He didn’t
budge. “I don’t want to drink tonight.” He grumbled defiantly. “Drinks are on the house tonight.” Aria reminded him firmly. “I would not refuse this.” She waved Vo’me on. Inhaling sharply, Bray spun on his heel to stomp off with Vo’me scurrying behind him. Watching him walk away, Aria shook her head. “What the hell is up with Bray?” She asked to no one. It was a problem that she didn’t want to deal with, but sooner or later, she just may have to.

“I bet it’s over a female.” Patriarch surprisingly replied. “They do that every time.”

“Female?” Aria cocked up her eye ridge. “Interesting….” Now the matter had her utmost attention.

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“Find anything useful?” Liara walked over to her friend on the Shadow Broker’s ship. Krysta came onboard once Liara got things straightened up. They endured a tough fight against the Yahg. However, with him gone, it led to the countless archives of data he collected to be free for the taking. Liara assumed the position of the new Shadow Broker and the transition was so seamless that his employees were not aware of the change.

Krysta was examining a terminal that contained maps for distant star systems that had promising intel for mining. “Yeah, I could spend hours here.”

“It’s quite exhausting.” Liara acknowledged gently as she watched her friend. She could tell Krysta was deeply troubled about something. “I don’t think I have slept in days.” She light-heartedly joked. This didn’t faze Krysta’s mood and the Asari’s hopes sank. “Shepard…” She paused to find her words. “I’m sorry. I should have been there for you.”

“You were there for me, Liara.” Krysta turned to address her friend. “You brought me back from the dead.”

The Shadow Broker rubbed the back of her neck with a smile. “I had help from Cerberus. I just got your body.” A beat. “That’s not what I was getting at. I know Kaidan’s death still troubles you…”

“Making me your experiment again, Dr. T’Soni?” Krysta asked, her tone mixed of play and seriousness. A reminder of their first encounter after Liara’s rescue from Therum. The young Asari was in awe that Shepard had a connection with the Protheans and wanted to learn everything she could about her.

Liara blushed. “Habit…there’s so much data here. It will take me months to go through just a fraction of it for analysis.” She thumbed over to the drone that was docked nearby. “I will see if it can assist me. I will focus on the Collectors and share what I come across. If I can’t help you out there, at least I can now help you here.”

“Thank you, Liara.” Krysta wanted to argue with her that it wasn’t the same. She needed Liara there on the Normandy, but T’Soni was right. She would be more useful to her there on Hagalaz. Her mind swept over to another direction; something that was gnawing on her mind for quite some time.

“Did the Shadow Broker have any contacts on Omega?”

Liara moved over to the large database to check. A few swift keystrokes and data flashed upon the screen, pages upon pages. “Hundreds.” Liara studied the information. “Not surprising. I was certain that the Shadow Broker had his agents there after what happened with Ferron.” She noticed Krysta coming up to her side. “What would you like them to find out?”

“I need intel on a Batarian there named Bray. A bodyguard of Aria T’Loak.” Krysta studied the lists of names displayed before her on the oversized monitor screen.
“Uh…sure. I’ll get on it right away.”

“ Transmit what you find directly to my terminal.” Krysta moved away towards the door that would lead her back to her ship.

The sudden departure caught T’Soni off guard. “Stay safe.” She called quickly back, but the doors were already closed behind Shepard.

Did you embrace eternity?” Joker cracked a grin as Krysta entered the ship once again.

Shepard rolled her almond color eyes. “You know Liara hates it when you say things like that around her.”

“Hello, she’s not here. That’s why I asked.” The grin on the pilot’s face didn’t leave.

“Just head to the Citadel.” Krysta moved towards the elevator that led her to the level where the assassin, Thane Krios, resided at. The Drell stood up from his desk to greet her as she entered his quarters. “I told Joker to head to the Citadel. We will find your son, Thane.”

“Thank you, Shepard. It would be good to know that I get this off my chest before my soul plunges into the sea for my final resting place.”

“Just don’t die before we get done with the Collectors.” Krysta didn’t quite understand the Drell’s logic and his embrace for his religion. She knew he was dying and she didn’t like the fact that he could drop dead at any time. However, his skills were off the chart and she needed him.

Her statement aroused a chuckle from the Drell. “I don’t plan on dying yet.”

“Then don’t talk like that,” Krysta harshly snapped. “I need everyone focused so we will deal with your son.”

“Understood.”

“To win the war against the Collectors, especially once we go through the Omega 4 Relay, I will need everyone clear and strong.

Weeks later...

Krysta rubbed her tired eyes as she moved inside her cabin. Her body was exhausted mentally and physically. How much longer could she last? She was able to clear up any loose strands that her squadmates had and everyone now was devoted one hundred percent to the cause, but she still felt like they were not ready to go up against the Collectors. The insect like repurposed Protheans stormed the Normandy in an ambush while she and her team were away and captured everyone except for Joker. All of them were doomed to be in whatever twisted experiments that the Reapers were concocting. How did she let this happen? She thought she was careful and multiple lives were most likely gone because of her carelessness, including an old friend, Dr. Chakwas. She had to make the order to enter the relay soon. A decision that was going to be tough…if they were not ready, then everyone on board including her could be killed in the process. Removing her clothes, she turned to head to her bed, but then paused when her terminal chimed indicating that a message was received. Could she not rest for one night without anything pressing? She first debated to simply ignore it, but then decided against it, remembering that Liara was going to reach out to her. Sure enough, it was from her: “I have some information on Bray that you asked for, Shepard. He has quite an interesting past. No ties with the Collectors or Reapers if you are going for that. I will transmit the data to your
terminal now. Stay safe out there.” Feeling her heart skip a beat from the anticipation of the information coming to her, she finally allowed herself to smile.

Suddenly, EDI’s voice came over her com that nearly made her jump out of her naked skin. “Incoming call from Admiral Hackett, Shepard.”

Scrambling to find her clothes, she hopped around as she fought to get her pants back on. “Hold the call, EDI!” Of all the worst possible times. Still feeling disheveled despite her clothed appearance, she caught her breath and then return to the terminal. “I’m ready, EDI.”

There was a few seconds delay and then the old familiar face of Steven Hackett appeared. His no-nonsense facial expression never altered in the years that passed. “Shepard, my apology for the late call. This is extremely urgent.”

“I was up, sir.” Krysta looked at him. Just like old times. “What’s the matter?” She let him divulge her with the details of what was going on and ironically it led to Bahak: A known Batarian system. As much as she wanted to help him out, she had to take on the Omega 4 Relay first. Her crew and humanity depended on her. She could not deviate from this even though her mind wasn’t quite made up earlier on. She promised him as soon as she was back, she would immediately set course there. He understood and commended her on her dedication. He assured her that Dr. Kenson may live until that time. She was a strong woman by the sound of her. But everyone knew how harsh Batarian prisons were. After she ended the call, Krysta laughed. “I’m still dealing with Batarians.” Her mind darted over to the previous message from Liara. She realized how happy she was becoming because she would learn more about Bray. She growled and slumped down on the bed. “What the hell is wrong with me?!”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Krysta Shepard prepares to enter the Omega 4 Relay.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE: CHAPTER 12

“Shepard, you okay?” Garrus’ familiar voice called up from below.

“Hmm?” Krysta turned to look down from her post at the galaxy map. Oblivious to just how long she was standing there.

“Sorry, Commander. You can’t choose a destination telepathically.” Joker’s sarcastic tone came over the comm. “Humanity is quite not there yet.”

“This is really it…are we ready?” Krysta ignored the pilot’s statement and kept her focus on the Turian standing there. One familiar face from her past. He never really seemed to leave her side, despite what odds they were up against. A true friend. “Is the Normandy truly ready?”

“We have all the upgrades. I checked all of it.” He cleared his throat. “Habit. The weapons system has been calibrated at least six times.”

“Six?” Krysta lifted an eyebrow.

Vakarian grinned. “Okay, maybe seven. You can never be too cautious. Not when we are going up against the Collectors. Hell, may as well be Sovereign again.”

“At least, a foe that I knew.” Shepard stepped down to where he was. She yearned for those days. Ilos was one thing, but the Omega 4 relay was a place like no other. It was far from the Alliance and Cerberus. If she died there, she would not return no matter how hard Liara tried. Ilos was neutral ground. A place that she and Saren had no idea what to encounter. Here, it was the Collector’s home base; their turf. They had the advantage and would use every means to expose that. There were tales of countless vessels crossing the relay to search for ancient relics to sell. None of them came back. “I have no idea what to expect.”

“I guess that will be all of us. We can handle it.” Garrus stated reassuringly.

She tossed him a smile. “You sound so confident.”

“Remember, I did hold back every merc group on Omega.”

“Not all of them.” She reminded him.

“Felt like it.”

“I’m glad you are still here, Garrus.”

“I have followed you this far, Commander. Why turn back now?” There was a long pause and then
he cleared his throat again. “I should let you go, Shepard. I’ll wait for your call.”

There was slight hesitation in his poise and Krysta eyed him carefully. Did he want to stand there and talk more or was it something else? She was fond of him, but never saw anything past a close friend. Perhaps, he felt the same or even more. It would make perfect sense, but the idea of having a relationship with an alien never crossed her mind…not until she went to Omega. A flash of Bray’s face entered her mind and sadness crept into her. Would she ever see him again? Did it even matter? Did he even care? She thought to the way he kissed her, the way he tasted. What did it all mean? Did he truly find something in her? Why would he? They were close to the comm buoy, maybe she could send a message and say a farewell. Her brown eyes glanced over at the terminal that housed her private inbound messages. Normally, her yeomen, Kelly Chambers, would be standing there and alert her of anything new or take down what she wanted to send. However, she was gone…taken by the Collectors. She had no love for Cerberus or their people, but her crew was innocent. They didn’t deserve what brutalities they may be enduring aboard the Collector vessel. She had to fight for them and every other colonist who lost their life or may lose their life. She had to fight for the lost; for humanity.

Stepping into her cabin, the photo frame of Kaidan caught her attention instantly. His charming smiling face almost looking right into her. His captivating brown eyes stealing her soul once again. She stepped up to the object and gently traced her finger around the frame’s edges then moved in closer to touch the outline of his face. “Kaidan…” She could feel the tears seeping into her eyes and grewlled in a mix of anger and frustration; she quickly slammed the frame front face down.
“Goodbye, Kaidan…I will always love you…” She gulped and fought the tightness forming in her chest. Kaidan was in the past and she had to have something to drive her now. If she fell, she didn’t want to be left behind with the Collectors as a test subject like the Protheans. She was not going to let that be her fate. As a soldier, her mission was clear. She had to take down the Collectors to save millions of lives and that meant risking her own life and the lives of her crew. They all knew that the mission was a complete suicide, but they accepted it. She had to move on from Kaidan. He was deceased and if came down to fighting for her life, she knew she would quickly succumb to whatever obstacle it was to just be with him again the afterlife.

Stripping down to her tank, she climbed into the bed to rest for the last two hours she had before reaching the relay. She grabbed the datapad at her bedside and scrolled to the cache stored from Liara. Bray would be her rock. Her driving force to keep her alive and get her back. She would not dive into the darkness abyss again. It was clear, humanity needed her and Sovereign was just one Reaper. The rest of them, hundreds, even thousands were out there and they were deadly. The Collectors were used by them and their demise would lead her to a straight conflict with the Reapers. She could not risk dying in this battle.

Her eyes dashed over the information that Liara graciously collected. Bray served in the Hegemony for only a few years in his earlier life, then left without discharge and was not seen for many years. The Hegemony marked him for desertion. He joined in with Aria’s services sometime after leaving the homeworld and had been on Omega since then. He started off as a dock worker and climbed his way up the chain to where he now served as her personal bodyguard. He was listed as unmarried, but marriages were not too common on Omega. Krysta pondered over the idea and debated if that meant he was involved with anyone or not. Her eyes then went on to read he had no children of his own. She began to wonder what that would be like. She never heard of anyone having relations with a batarian. The idea was taboo given that they were one of humanity’s most hated enemies. Was it even possible biologically? Her face grew warm when she realized what she was thinking about and she tossed the pad aside in embarrassment. Flopping back down on her pillow, she stared up at the ceiling with her hands behind her head. “This is it…”
Bray was lounging in his apartment’s chair, reading over the datapad that contained Krysta Shepard’s information that he stole from Aria, when his holo alarm chirped. Realizing that he became so engrossed in learning all that he could about the woman that he made himself late for guard duty. He scrambled towards his door and tossed the pad on the floor. “Shit!” He read so much about Krysta lately that he was obsessed and spent all his free time on the subject. She lost one squadmate named Kaidan Alenko, a human, on Virmire. One personal entry logged by Shepard herself stated she was so pained by his death. He could tell that she truly loved him. Was that the reason why she was so guarded from him on Omega? Was it not as dark as he assumed? What was so special about this Kaidan? What did she want in a partner? A lover? He toyed with the idea and found his mind going even further with the notion and then he wondered what their first coupling would be like. He knew about humans’ anatomy. It was similar with the Asari, but he never found their physique to be attractive. The more he was around her, the more he found that statement to be a farce. He did find her attractive, very attractive. So much that he cared nothing for the entertainers like he did in his past. Aria tried her best to cheer him up, but his time with Vo’me was very short lived. A few drinks to appease T’Loak and then back to his place alone.

Hustling through the crowds, he saw a familiar salarian ahead going towards the club. It was one of Aria’s surveillance agents and she seemed to be in a hurry. Shoving a volus aside to create a path, Bray quickened his steps to catch up. “Wait!”

The blue toned salarian turned to look at him with her confused bulbous eyes. “Bray?” She then giggled. “Running late, are we?”

“Got something, Letip?” He huffed to catch his breath. He was really going to be late to report in, but now he got good reason. He could deliver news to Aria personally.

Letip handed him the datapad. “We picked up a ship heading towards the Omega 4 Relay again.”

“Another one?” Bray groaned. He was tired of random mercs heading inside letting greed fuel their judgment.

“Uh huh…Cerberus marked vessel this time.” Letip explained further. “I thought Aria would like to know.”

“Cerberus?” The name of the organization grasped Bray’s attention and he glanced over the datapad. His eyes widened. “Thank you. I’ll take this to Aria.”

“Here to serve.” Letip bowed slightly and then scurried back to whatever hole she came out of.

Bray browsed over the information as he stepped inside. The Normandy entered the Omega 4 relay shortly ago. Was Shepard that damn crazy? He knew all the horror stories about the blackout hole relay that was located in the same system that they shared. An instant death sentence. What was it in for her, though? He didn’t take Krysta to have the same mindset as a merc or pirate. Holding the pad away from his view, he moved ahead to Aria’s platform where the pirate queen was waiting for him with a displeased look on her face. “Your late, Bray.”

“Got stopped by intel.” He approached her and handed her the pad. “Thought you wanted to see this.”

Aria eyed him suspiciously and then accepted it to read it herself. She scoffed at its contents. “Shame.” Bray moved over to his post at her platform’s entrance and stood guard. The purple Asari’s blue eyes never left him and he caught her glance. She was not done with him yet. “Tough luck, Bray.” He tilted his head to the left, the Batarian way of showing respect. He had no idea what
she was getting at and she knew it. “She would have been trouble for you.”

He stared at her with slight hesitation. How did she find out? His long pause slip confirmed her suspicions. “I have no idea what you are talking about.” He lied, a bad one at that.

Aria rolled her eyes to dismiss his answer. “Sure, you don’t.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Fallout ensues after Krysta Shepard chooses to keep the Collector vessel for the Illusive Man

Paul Johnson and Liselle copyrighted to Mass Effect Retribution

MASS EFFECT SOLACE: CHAPTER 13

“Four pair high.” Bray announced as he displayed his winning hand. Sanak’s lip curled back to reveal the batarian’s sharp incisors, clearly frustrated with losing another hand to his comrade.

“You’re too damn good.” Sanak snapped as he reluctantly sat back as Bray moved in to scoop up his winnings. Just as Bray cleared his sight, Sanak’s eyes focused on the club’s newcomers and his eyes narrowed. “It’s them.” Distaste salivating on his tongue.

Bray glanced over his shoulder to see a familiar blue pigmented Asari accompanied by a middle aged male human walking through the club’s main doors. Liselle was not uncommon to the Afterlife. She frequent the club every day unless she was on a job for Aria T’Loak. A few that Aria really trusted knew her real connection to the pirate queen. She was Aria’s daughter. Her father identity was unknown. Aria never talked about it and no one dared pried. Bray was one of the select few that really knew who Liselle was, but was threatened by death by Aria herself if they dared to release that information. Aria always had contingencies and if someone did decide to cross the line, the matter could be straightened up right away with any real hurt to Omega’s operations. Despite this, Aria would not display it as public knowledge. The human, on the other hand, was an outsider. Paul Johnson, a mercenary looking for work on Omega; arrived at the station two years ago and seemed to climb up the ranks to doing hits for Aria. He seemed move up faster than Bray did, but then again, he had special privileges. Liselle seemed to take a liking to him. The two were attracted to one another on a sexual level and could be told by their body movements. Sanak was “forced” to work with the human since he was placed into his group for assignments and Bray knew that his hatred towards humanity made the placement not ideal. Liselle’s arm draped over Johnson’s shoulder as they approached. Liselle gave them each a flirtatious wink as she passed, her hand still coiled around Johnson’s body as they made their way through the patrons and towards the main dance floor. Bray glanced over to Aria’s booth to see that the ruler of Omega already took notice of her daughter’s entrance. The look of distrust and caution painted over her purple pigmentation. “I hate him.” Sanak grimaced as he tossed his cards aside. “He ruined my fucking night.”

“You jealous?” Bray hinted towards where the pair went. “Can’t get some of that?”

“I don’t know what the hell she sees in him.” Sanak grumbled. The look of resentment overshadowed his two sets of eyes as he squarely looked upon Bray. “Word got around. You into that?”

“What?” Bray was not yet following the sudden change of the conversation.
“Humans.” The word spilled out of Sanak’s mouth like it was vile.

“Have you seen me with a fucking human?” Bray’s voice angrily rose, trying his best to have the lie sold. “Don’t be disgusting.”

“A few said they saw you with Commander Shepard when she was on the station.” Sanak disclosed.

This alarmed Bray. Then again, there were all spies all around, waiting to back stab the other for a chance to further advance themselves. Bray was careful, but did he slip up? How much did they see? He shook his head and reshuffled the deck of cards. “I tailed her because Aria wanted to know why she came on the station.”

Sanak was not ready to back down yet. “Moklan usually follows people.”

Bray gave a haphazard shrug. “Go ask Aria if you would like. I guess she didn’t trust Moklan. I don’t know what’s the big deal about her anyway.”

This time, Sanak let it go. He dared not to question Aria’s choices. Even he was not that stupid. He gave a light grunt and motioned for Bray to deal the next hand. Bray rose up from the table. “I need a smoke before my break’s up.”

Sanak waved him off and moved towards the bar where a krogan merc stood to engage in talk. Bray took out his pack of cigarettes and selected one with his fingers as he exited the club. Smoking was permitted inside the club, but Bray wanted to escape the noise. He needed to clear his head. There was no word back on the outcome of Shepard’s mission into the Omega 4 Relay. That’s if Aria already knew and did not disclose it to him. He could always go down and ask intel, but he already crossed her once by doing this. Another strike and he would be cast out from the station. Maybe Krysta was dead. It would make sense why there were no messages from her. The likelihood of someone coming back from Omega 4 Relay was at a marginal one percent. No one had. Especially when knowing what lurked for them on the other side.

Inhaling the smoke through his mouth, he held it for a few seconds before relinquishing it from his nostrils. He stared down at the line waiting for entry into the club. Hopefuls could stand out there for hours and never be granted access. The door fee was high and that was meant to keep a lot of riff raff out. This is where he belonged.

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“Ladies and gentlemen, we brought Christmas to the Collectors this year.” Joker announced with a silly grin as he held up a beer in his right hand. His dark eyes overlooking the crew of the Normandy SR-2. “I hoped they liked the gunfire!”

“Hell yeah!” Jack tossed out as she took a swig from her own bottle. “Thank you, Rupert, for keeping a nice stash of booze on this joint.”

Rupert chuckled. “You’re welcome.”

Krysta walked into the center of the CIC to where everyone could turn their focus on her. “I couldn’t have done it without all of you, Cerberus included.” She took a sip from her bottle and could feel some eyes glaring at her with a look of distrust and pain. She knew she would not be a fan favorite after the war with the Collectors was over. She was tasked for a quick and tough decision. The base itself housed gut wrenching experiments that were performed on the Collectors and the humans they abducted from colonies, but despite all that, there were tons of advanced technology and data that they could salvage and study to help them stop the Reapers. The Illusive Man implored her to save the vessel so that way Cerberus could harness this latest information. Surprisingly, Miranda was not sure in trusting the Illusive Man further and warned Krysta about dealing with him any further. Grunt agreed to keep the tech and use it to make themselves stronger. He didn’t trust “their man” though and hinted towards keeping the salvage somehow. The Alliance wouldn’t risk lives through the
Omega 4 Relay to obtain what they left behind and who knows how long it would take to go through everything. After all, they were not one hundred percent onboard about the Reapers coming. She didn’t have that kind of time. Cerberus believed her and Cerberus was ready to do whatever it was necessary to make sure they had a way to stop them. Because of that, Krysta accepted the Illusive Man’s offer and left the ship for him. However, she made it clear that she was done with him for now. Their partnership could dissolve since they accomplished their means. There were no ill feelings towards one another and she left it at that. A quietness fell over the crew and a few cleared their throats to disrupt the awkward silence. “Get some rest, you all need it. Dismissed.” Krysta tried not to sound disappointed as she spoke. A few stragglers conversed in conversations of their own while most returned to their posts. True soldiers: Always waiting for the next assignment.

“Shep, we need to talk.” Jack was the first one to speak up and she could tell that the ex-con was biting her tongue ever since they came back.

“I’m listening.”

“What’s this bullshit about helping Cerberus? You saw what they did to those kids right? What they did to me?” The woman was tense and whatever liking she had towards her Commander quickly dissipated.

“I remember damn well what they did.” Krysta clenched her jaw as she fought to yell back at her teammate. She squared Jack up. “Remember, they got you out of prison to help on this mission. You don’t have to stay.”

“Damn right I don’t.” Jack didn’t move. “I know why I decided to help you guys and it wasn’t to give Cerberus more things to torture children with.”

“This has nothing to do with that, Jack.” Krysta exhaustively argued. “I want to stop the Reapers. We are not ready. Earth is not ready. How many children are on the planet? Millions. Do you really want to see a million children killed or turned into husks?!” The raise of her voice made everyone focus their attention on the debate. “It was a tough choice and I didn’t have time to really know the full details. What if I destroyed that base and it could have saved lives?! Sometimes, the choice is not always going to be black and white. I sure didn’t have that choice on Torfan. I lived with the consequences. I didn’t hesitate.”

Jack took a few moments to fire back, “You’re just like the rest of them. Once Cerberus, always Cerberus. I shouldn’t have trusted you.” The multiple tattooed woman turned towards the elevator to head down to where her things were. Onlookers clumsily returned to what they were doing, playing out that they didn’t hear any of that.

“Shepard...” Garrus’ soft voice called over to her where he stood stationary, transfixed upon what recently displayed before him. Anger flooded her eyes, accusing him silently of wanting to argue with her. Though this time, this wasn’t the case. “I hope that salvage will be beneficial. Cerberus has never been a team player.”

“Let’s hope.” Jacob chimed in, joining in on the conversation. “The Illusive Man never lets you to see the whole picture.”

“Shore Leave?” Joker’s hopeful voice came over the PA. A term that a lot of the crew prayed for.

Krysta quickly shook her head. “Harbinger is coming and he won’t be alone. The Reapers won’t rest and neither will we.” She moved towards the galaxy map and scrolled through the systems until she found the one she was looking for. “Admiral Hackett needed me to help break a woman out from a batarian prison that may have clues of an imminent Reaper invasion. I need to find out what she
“Aratoht?” Garrus recognized their destination on the screen. “Not a friendly place.”

“You been there?” Krysta looked down at him.

“No,” He admitted. “But when the population is ninety-nine percent batarian, how nice will they be with a human lurking about?”

“Not very nice at all.” Krysta moved away from the map and headed towards the armory. “I’ll bring some heavy weapons.”

“You going alone?” Jacob followed her with worry. “Shepard, that’s not a good idea.”

“I agree with Jacob.” Garrus moved into the room. “That will be suicide…” He then paused, remembering their past mission and rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “Heh…pun?”

“I appreciate the support, but I can’t risk too much attention on this mission. If the batarians found out that a heavily armed squad is breaking into a prison to release a deemed terrorist, then they will run with that to the Hegemony. I can be more discreet if I’m alone. I’m doing this as a favor for Hackett.” Krysta paused at the cabinet that housed the guns and eyed each one carefully. She finally settled on an assault rifle and held it to check the scope. “I’ll be in and out of there without making too much of a mess.” She grinned. “Besides, I have a tougher mission here that you guys can help with.”

“What’s that?” Jacob eyed Garrus carefully before giving his consent. Not like he had the choice to refute a direct order from his superior.

“Keep an eye on Jack. Get her calmed down.” Krysta’s grin never left her lips. She was playing, yet being serious at the same time. Jack was a powerful biotic and if she brooded too long she may just do some considerable damage while leaving the Normandy if she couldn’t find a ride out of there too quickly.

“I-is that a direct order, Shepard?” Garrus’ voice quivered.

“Yes.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The aftermath from the destruction of the Bahak system. It's open season now on humanity.

This connects to Mass Effect Retribution novel

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 14

“No…no…” Krysta breathed through her helmet as she watched the relay’s destruction unfold on the galaxy map. Each ring indicating a planet’s orbit faded away into nothing. She didn’t bother to remove her helmet once she was on board. She raced immediately to the galaxy map; hoping that somehow the asteroid’s crash course into the relay would not come to a violent end as the program’s AI indicated to her. It had to be wrong…some had to be spared. Several of her teammates were already on the CIC level to watch the aftermath. No words were spoken. Finally, the last planet’s spark of life was extinguished and the map displayed an error. It was not possible…an entire system just obliterated! Her entire body went limp and she caught herself on the rail as her knees buckled out from under her.

“Shepard!” Garrus rushed to her side and gingerly hoisted her back up on her feet. “Are you okay?”

Krysta’s mouth felt dry and no words could come out. “Shepard, the comm is blowing up with chatter!” Joker called over the PA. “Alliance High Command has sent a message. It’s from Admiral Hackett. He sent me coordinates for a meeting.”

“Go there now, Joker…I’m not hiding anything.” Krysta somehow found her strength. Things were going to look bad on her…a definite political fallout. Her life as a Spectre could be over and even her career with the Alliance. What would Bray say to all this? Knowing that the one person he cares about is responsible for the deaths of three hundred thousand innocent batarians? Without a word to the Turian beside her, she turned and move towards the elevator. The ship remained in a ghostly silence. The shock still did not wear off. What repercussions would befall them for housing her, she wondered? She knew that they were one hundred percent behind her, but she didn’t want them to be penalized for what she did. She would see to that. She always owned up to her choices.

“Just a bunch of four eyes…” Zaeed huffed under his breath nearby. It was just loud enough to be picked up by her.

Within microseconds, she extended her omni blade and moved upon him. The orange glowing sharp blade’s tip pressed up against the stunned merc’s chin. She pressed just firmly enough to allow the tip to touch against his skin, breaking it some and drawing blood. Displaying the dire situation that he was in. She had no reasons to keep him alive now. The mission with the Collectors was over and technically, his contract with Cerberus had been fulfilled. The expression that masked her face was dark enough to show him her answer to his comment. No words had to be said. Her reaction time to draw out her weapon and be upon him was the quickest he had ever seen in his life. He gulped
slowly as he stared back at her with his one good eye. Jack intervened and Krysta felt the woman’s hand upon her shoulder. “Shep…” The convict called out to her softly.

Shrugging her hand away coldly, Krysta retracted her blade and continued her course to the elevator. She could feel the eyes of her crew staring upon her, but she would not meet their gaze. Keeping her head down, she waited until the elevator doors were closed before lifting it. She felt so numb. There were always casualties in war, but not this many at her own hands. This was just to delay the inevitable. How many more lives had to be sacrificed to not just run the Reapers back into dark space, but wipe them out from their existence? Half a million? Million? Billion? She didn’t even want to think about it.

Upon her arrival to her cabin, Krysta made a beeline to the bathroom to soak her face. When she knew she was truly alone, she allowed herself to break down. Tears poured down her face like a river. How many trials and tribulations would she have to endure? The splash of water upon her face couldn’t clear the horror that burned in her eyes after getting back from her mission on Aratoht. Her wet reflection looking right back at her, her hair matted to her face. She appeared to be so opaque that she could look right deep into her soul. All those lives…snuffed out in an instant. Over three hundred thousand…she couldn’t even imagine what was going through the casualties’ minds as the apocalypse crashed upon them in rapid succession. Thanks to Dr. Kenson, there was no warning. No time to vacate to the nearest shuttle in hopes to escape the doomed relay unscathed. No time to say farewell to loved ones before ascending upon the afterlife. No time to hold one another and pray to whatever gods they worshiped or feared. Some part of her distressed message had to make it through before the block came into place. Somebody must have heard…someone must have escaped.

Her room intercom buzzed notifying her of an incoming call within the ship. She didn’t answer. There were a few seconds of silence and then the familiar voice of Joker filled the room. “Commander…” The pilot’s voice was soft to address the fragile situation. Krysta was grateful that the bearer of the unwelcome news would be human and not an AI. She didn’t request a status report from EDI, but Moreau knew her long enough to read her mind. This needed a human touch to it. He paused and she could hear the slight discord in his voice. “Beacon data indicates that there were no emergency broadcasts prior to the relay destruction. Shepard…” He held his breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too, Joker…” Krysta wiped her face with her towel. “Tell everyone that I want privacy and alert me as soon as Hackett enters our system.”

“Understood.” The comm went silent, leaving her back to her thoughts.

An emergency broadcast alarm startled Bray out of his sleep. Not completely cohesive, he groaned and pulled the pillow over the back of his head as he buried his face into the mattress. Then realizing what exactly was taking place, he jumped out of the bed, nearly tripping over the sheet that was still wrapped around one of his ankles. “What the hell?!” He stumbled over to his terminal while debating if he should grab his armor first or wait for the terminal to come to life. Deciding on the latter, he waited until the screen showed the broadcast message. “BAHAK SYSTEM ANNIHILATED. NO REPORTED SURVIVORS.” It took him a good four reads to let the information process, the subject was unfathomable. “How could that be?” He shook his head. It had to be an error. How could one system be destroyed?

The screen flashed indicating that he had an incoming call. It was Aria. “Bray.”

“I’m on it.” He was already moving over towards his gear to suit up. He didn’t have to wait on her to give the orders. She wanted intel and it had to be top priority. Aria was never one to be swayed by commentators. She would get the information and decide for herself. Bahak was a known batarian system and Omega housed thousands of batarians. If war was coming, it may ultimately tear the
station apart. Aria did not want that to happen. Deep down inside, Bray felt pained for all those who lost their lives. If it was an act of war, the Hegemony would be knocking on doors. He never had any loyalty to the cause like so many of his counterparts, but it still formed a stone in his chest. It had to be a freak accident with the relay that would cause the destruction of Bahak, no one would be that sick and twisted to just somehow find a way to destroy it to lash out at batarians. If it was a new kind of warfare, then how safe would he be? Not even Aria could keep Omega safe. His dark eyes glanced back at the terminal once he was fully dressed. Maybe he would have enough time to reach out to Krysta. Surely, she would have heard the news by now. He retrieved one of his prior messages to her and typed in what he wanted to say. He had no idea where she was currently, but he hoped that the message would hit her comm buoy soon. After sending the message off, he grabbed his rifle and hurried out of his apartment.

Time slipped away as Krysta stared up at the ceiling above her bed. She encouraged herself to get some rest before Hackett’s arrival, but her guilty conscience deprived her of that. If what occurred ten years ago, she may have not chosen to warn the colonists, but now she had a duty to do so. She wanted them to live. Did Bray influence her way of thinking? A soft chime came from her terminal and she glanced over at the screen. Slowly getting up, her body ached from the physical exertion it had endured on Aratoht. Sitting down in the chair, she pulled up the notification to see that an incoming message was received from Bray. Her heart stopped. She hesitated if she wanted to read the contents of the message. She could only imagine what he was going through his mind. Taking a slow deep breath out of her mouth, she opened the message and read. “Got news that Bahak was wiped clean. Crazy shit. Hope you are safe and know how to deal with this. If you, please share.”

“He doesn’t know….” Krysta spoke out loud. Then again, it made sense. It only had been a few hours and it would take a few more for the authorities to dig into transmissions from the system just prior to the destruction. Data was constantly captured from the relays. They would find out that the last ship to exit was the Normandy SR-2. Then would pour the accusations and conspiracies. Alliance High Command would lose sleep for several months to try to stay atop of the fallout and the counterattacks by batarian extremists. It would be open season against humanity. Hundreds could lose their lives if the Alliance was not proactive... Colonial Affairs would start to perform mandatory evacuations and investors would close out their off-world interests. Earth could hit a huge slump. All because she was trying to give the planet more time.

Raising her fingers above the keyboard, Krysta moved to respond, but she couldn’t get her mind to figure out on what to say. What could she say? Should she play dumb? Should she admit to it? Lay out her defense then and there? If she did, how would he react? Would he even believe her? Even if by chance that he did, what could he do? If he publicly defended her actions, he would be deemed a traitor to his species and marked. If she lied, and it was later discovered that she did, then how would he see her? Joker’s announcement broke up her inner debate. “He’s here, Commander.” Once again, time ran out.

Sighing hard in defeat, she turned off her terminal. “I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Commander.” Chakwas called to her over the room’s comm.

“Go ahead.”

“You didn’t come for your neuro scan. I would like to get this done prior to you speaking with the Admiral. He has requested the report. Can you come here first?”

“Oh my way.”

Chakwas smiled as she read the scan’s results. “Everything is clean, Commander. I was a bit worried.”
“I can’t believe that Kenson had that artifact out in the open like that. All those people indoctrinated without them even realizing it.”

“You were there too.” The doctor furrowed her brow with worry.

The fear was already in her mind too. What if Krysta was already indoctrinated by Harbinger and just didn’t know it? She felt like herself and she knew all the symptoms of indoctrination that she picked up on; especially from those aboard the derelict Reaper. She had no headaches, no ringing in the ears, no whispers, no memory loss. Her cognitive function was intact.

The med bay door whisked open and in stepped Admiral Hackett. His heavily decorated uniform shined brightly from the room’s interior lights. Jumping quickly off the table, Krysta snapped to attention. “Sir.” She held her chest up proudly as her eyes stared into the distance.

The older gentleman returned the salute and clasped his hands behind his back with his shoulders squared in a stern military posture. Throughout the years she knew him, he was fair, but a no-nonsense individual. He didn’t want to dance around the facts and wanted everything a straight shot. Chakwas excused herself from the room, leaving just the two of them. Hackett remained still until she left the room then returned his focus back to Krysta who didn’t flinch. “Commander, let’s talk.”

Later that night…

Bray was heading back to the club after running an errand, when a batarian announcer came over the street’s pa system. “This just in and listen up. Word is that Bahak was taken out by none other than Commander Shepard. She intentionally rammed an asteroid into the relay. Savior of the galaxy? Bah! She hates batarians and we all know her service record on Torfan. The Hegemony is declaring war on the humans and I say, we fully support the cause. We do not need the Council to back us up. Screw them. Free shuttles to the homeworld to get enlisted. Sign up at the kiosk outside Marsh’s Sales. See any humans that support Shepard, you have my permission to punch them in the face.”

After hearing the announcement, Bray stopped dead in his tracks. “No fucking way….” His eyes wide with confusion as he tried to comprehend what was being laid out. Intel should have reached Aria way before this. Did she already know? Why wouldn’t she tell him? Not like she had to. Wouldn’t she know what this story would do? He cautiously glanced around to see locals gossiping amongst one another. Some were already isolated themselves from humans while the humans began to quickly scurry to the privacy of the living quarters. Fear all over their faces. Several disgruntled batarians were making a beeline down to the markets where Marsh’s store was located. Already? A few gave him glances as they passed by. Were they already judging him? He shook his head and continued his way to Afterlife. It would soon be a free for all with the judgment and he had to remain neutral for now. “There is no way…” He grumbled under his breath. He could feel a nagging voice in the back of his mind. What if he was wrong? Her profile did flag her hatred for his kind. She didn’t seem that type anymore after their last encounter on Omega. She fooled him…he fooled himself. How could he fathom to love such a being?

“Did you hear the news?” Sanak greeted him at the front door with a smirk; a sudden abruption of his thinking. He must have returned sooner from his last hit.

Bray glared sharply at him. “Fuck off.” He shoved Sanak out of the way and moved inside. Up ahead, a pair of disgruntled Talon turian mercs were waiting for clearance to Aria’s booth. A krogan bodyguard was blocking their path until the word was given. “What do we have, Zrax?”

“The Talons want to whine to Aria.” Zrax grunted towards the pair in front of him.
“Bullshit. We were attacked and our stash was taken.” The first Turian snarled. “Aria knows damn well what’s going on.”

“Yeah, she’s making us wait for nothing.” The second joined in on the conversation.

“Because she can.” Bray snapped back. “You knew better than to stiff her.”

“We need to survive. The other gangs are taking our turf. We can’t go around and lick her asari ass like you do.” The first one turned on him. Instantly, his bony face was smashed into with the butt of Bray’s rifle. The impact fractured his nose and busted his upper lip. Blue blood splattered all over. The injured turian recoiled quickly and guarded his injured face. “Damnit!”

“Shut you up, didn’t it?” Bray hissed through his teeth.

Zrax chuckled from the amusement.

Aria’s voice came through his earpiece. “I’m ready.”

Joker and Garrus watched in dismay as Krysta was packing her things in her cabin. The meeting with Hackett did not fare well, but it was the best that she could expect. All hell was breaking loose and the Hegemony was demanding blood. If she remained free, the Alliance would be blamed. Her Spectre status was already stripped by the Council. So much for loyalty after saving them from Saren’s wrath. She couldn’t blame them though. If they didn’t, the Hegemony could spark other races to revolt against the Council. Hackett said at some point, she would need to turn herself over to the Alliance for a hearing and trial of the charges. With the war against the Collectors over, she had to do this now. Her conviction would take her to Earth and that’s where the Reapers would strike. She had to get the word out. Earth had to be ready.

“Can’t they just do a video trial? I mean this is bullshit!” Joker finally severed the silence. His voice heated with pain and compassion. “You should not go down for this!”

“Do they realize if you stopped the asteroid then Earth could be in ruins right about now?” Garrus objected.

Krysta was exasperated. She didn’t have to debate with them. They were all right, but that didn’t mean anything right now. The Alliance couldn’t just file a report and slide this one under the stack. “I appreciate everything. I must do this. Trust me.”

Joker crossed his arms. “I refuse to fly anyone else around if it’s not you, Shepard.”

She tossed him a soft smile. “Knowing you, Joker, I’m sure that would be an accurate statement.”

“What do you need me to do?” Garrus was still flustered by the sudden news. “I have contacts still with C-Sec. I can pull a few strings and see if I can get word to the Council. They have to reinstate you and back you on this.”

“No. This is an Earth matter for now.” Krysta grimly smiled at her undecorated quarters. Was this truly it? “I want you all to be ready. I may not see you again until the Reapers strike. Get the word out.”

“I’ll see who I can reach once I dock.” Joker nodded, still not enthusiastic about the turn of the events.

“I can go to Palaven. They will have to believe us.”
Krysta chewed her lip. “There is one thing that I need you to do. One of you.” She frowned over at her terminal. With the Alliance involved, information could be seized from the ship and all her private messages would no longer be considered private. If she sent a message to Omega to plead her case to Bray, it may be admissible in the proceedings. She couldn’t risk it. She had to leave him out of this. For his own sake as well. Still, she wanted to find way to reach out to him. To give her peace. There could be only one option. She turned her head to her friends. “I need the Shadow Broker to get a message out.”

“On it!” Both raised their hands.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Aria's attacked from within. The Shadow Broker sends a message to Bray on Omega

Some events taken from Mass Effect Retribution

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 15

“You said it was urgent?” Bray questioned the krogan security guard that called him from one of the apartment complexes that Aria owned.

“Yeah. I think there’s trouble inside.” The Krogan directed his head upwards towards one of the upper levels of the building. His skin tone was bright yellow, indicating that he was still young in Krogan years. The older ones cost more and Aria didn’t mind being cheap when it came to just monitor the apartments.

The statement was vague and it pained Bray’s head. “Details, Samar?” In frustration, Bray rolled both sets of eyes.

Samar pulled up his omni tool and gave a haphazard shrug. “There was a party in unit seven fifty-five, Johnson. I did a perimeter walk a few hours after that and there was no sound coming from the apartment.” He gave a sideways glance. “I think there’s trouble. Protocol states that I should get clearance from the complex owner before I’m allowed to enter. That’s why I called you.”

“Maybe the bastard is just asleep.” Sanak blurted from where he walked up behind them, overhearing the conversation. The animosity towards the human clearly displayed in his tone.

The krogan before them shrugged once more in disregard. “I can clear the alert if you think there’s no problem.”

“We are here. May as well check it out.” Bray stepped forward towards the building.

“He’s probably dusted.” Sanak commented as he followed him. “He did keep what we stole from the Talons.” Red Sand was a hot drug on Omega and there were a lot of users. The drug really had no effect on the batarians so they were never the buyers, and mostly the sellers. It did, however, effect humans. Paul did keep all the bricks from their hit against the Talons; of course, until Aria could make arrangements to get the product moved without any attention.

Arriving outside Johnson’s apartment five minutes later, Bray instantly noticed that there were no sounds coming from within of the apartment. He swiped his keycard to override the door’s security lock and waited a few seconds for the door to activate. The first room clearly showed something was not right. A few pieces of the furniture were shoved back. “Lights seventy-five percent.” The room’s interior lights adjusted accordingly.

“Look at that.” Sanak pointed over to the garments of clothing lying ahead. He moved over to examine and gave Bray a grin. “It’s Liselle’s.” Bray observed that the clothes were intact and no signs of blood.
Bray sighed as he strained his head towards the hallway that led to the bedroom. “Damn Samar….” He huffed under his breath. It seemed like her and Johnson disrobed or at least she did and then were probably in the bed sleep from having sex. He really didn’t want to walk in on that.

Sanak pushed past him to move towards the room. He, on the other hand, had no issue about disturbing them. Bray didn’t move. He just watched Sanak. The batarian made it to open the doorway and then the color from his face drained. He snapped his head back towards Bray. “Shit! Shit! Call it in! Get in here!”

Bray rushed to the door and saw the grotesque violent scene displayed before him. Liselle’s lifeless naked body displayed on the bed. Her throat had been cut. There were no signs of Johnson. Sanak moved over to Liselle to touch her body. “She’s dead.”

“You think?” Bray cursed silently. How was Aria going to take this? How could he tell her that her daughter had been murdered? “Check the room. I’ll call a team and Aria.” He stepped out into the hall. He would call Aria first. The team would arrive before she did if he called them first and he knew she wanted to see everything as it was before it was cleaned and processed.

“Yes?” Aria answered his call within the club. He could hear the deafening music in the background. Annoyance rang in her voice. Most likely, she was entertaining a guest.

“You better come see this. I’m at Johnson’s apartment.” He decided not to disclose the full details over the comm. He knew better. Her frequencies were secure, but he didn’t want to risk exposing the one secret that she kept from many on Omega.

“Fine.” The connection was terminated.

“Fuck. I knew it.” Sanak groaned. “He stole the drugs!”

“You sure?”

“I didn’t like him keeping them here.”

Bray moved to his terminal. All the information from it had been scrubbed. He scowled. “It’s clean.”

“Bastard killed her and took the drugs. I never did like him.” Sanak moved around the room to see what else he could scrounge up.

“Aria cleared him.” Bray reminded him. He remembered what lengths T’Loak went to check Johnson’s story out; especially since he got close to her daughter.

“Lesson learned. Never trust humans. The only good ones are dead.”

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Krysta fired her left punches in rapid succession, striking her invisible target relentlessly again and again. She then switched to a cross punch, striking their jaw. Sweat glistened all over her arms, chest and stomach. She could hear her breathing so heavy and her dog tags hitting one another.

The sound of her room’s door opening, made her stop suddenly. She then felt embarrassed by the surprised visitation as she stood there in her sports bra, workout pants and sneakers. Even if she had to remain confined until her hearing, it didn’t mean she had to just sit and lay around all the time. She had to remain in shape. She had to remain vigilant. What good could she do if she was overweight and out of shape? In her eyes, besides Anderson, most politicians were and the Reapers were not an adversary that you could argue with or negotiate with. No deals could be made with them. The only thing that they wanted was indoctrination. Saren made the mistake of trying to bargain his life and in the process, fell to them. She would never make that mistake. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she
smiled to see Liara T'Soni walking in. “Liara!” She excitedly moved towards her friend once the doors were closed to embrace her, but then realized her status. She blushed and stopped herself. “Sorry.”

“Good to see you, Shepard.” Liara leaned in to give her a slight hug.

“I’m surprised that they allowed me visitors.” Seeing her old friend made Krysta long for her release. T’Soni gave a coyly smile. “I persuaded Admiral Hackett.”

“Uh huh.” Krysta knew that her friend was hiding something from her and teasing about withholding information about what kind of deal she had to make with the admiral to grant her access to see the galaxy’s most hated individual right now. “She was located on Luna Base in a holding cell for a few weeks until her designated assignment would be decided. Most likely, it would be San Francisco, California on Earth. It was the epicenter of the Alliance. Hackett had sole custody of her at the time and he was responsible for keeping her housed-on Luna. If she managed to escape, which he knew she would not attempt, it would be on him.

“Shepard, this is not how I imagined the war against the Reapers to be like.” Liara’s blue eyes looked upon her with worry. “What good can you do just sitting here?”

“Give them time.” Krysta reassuringly patted her on the arm. “They will come around. I mean look at the Council. I never thought they would believe about Saren.”

“That’s different.” Liara shook her head. “The Council didn’t lock you up.”

This aroused a chuckle from Shepard. “I guess not.” She moved over to her bed and sat on the edge. Liara stood there. “Shepard, do you ever wish you did something different?”

“Like?”

“You remember the recruitment ads we saw earlier about the Andromeda Initiative?”

Krysta thought back to the program that she was referring to. She only heard bits and pieces. Some big venture to a new galaxy, promising those wanting to sign up, a chance at a new life and fresh start, ultimately knowing that they would never see their friends or family again. The war with the Reapers gave her purpose to staying in the Milky Way galaxy, but she never thought to joining the Initiative if given the opportunity. No one approached her. Probably for the same reason that she told herself: She was there to stop the Reapers from wiping out all organic life. Besides, what would stop them from hitting another galaxy? “You know I never run away, Liara.” She told her friend firmly.

“I know that. Just something to always think about.”

“I think we lost our chance.” Krysta reminded her. “Didn’t the arks already leave?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are we having this conversation?” Krysta’s tone came out more antagonistic than planned. She caught on to it and sighed hard. “Sorry…just going stir crazy.”

“It’s okay.” Liara took to her side and sat down on the bed. “I wanted to let you know that the Shadow Broker did send a message to Omega.” The Asari kept it at that and Krysta nodded her head
They both knew it would be wise enough to not assume that the room was clean so no more details would be disclosed. She grasped Krysta’s hand and lightly squeezed it encouragingly before rising back up from the bed. “I have to head out soon for my next assignment.”

“Assignment?” The news caught Krysta off-guard.

“I can’t say.”

“Just like Ilium. Why so secretive this time?” Krysta was frustrated by being kept out of the loop on everything.

“Just more digging. That’s all.” Liara assured her.

“Therum?” Krysta tossed out with a soft smile. She thought back to the time when she first found the Prothean scientist. “I saved your blue ass from that forcefield bubble.”

“I could have gotten out.” Liara argued playfully.

“Then why did you yell out ‘Help! I’m trapped! Can anyone hear me?’”

“Touché, Shepard.” Liara giggled. “Those were good times.”

“Probably never see those again.”

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The volus food merchant recognized Bray as he approached his shop. “Ah, it’s you. Same as always?”

“The same.” Bray reached into his pocket for his credit chit as he waited for the merchant to prepare his meal: two beef sticks dipped in the house special sauce. Not fine dining, but probably one of the best merchants on the station.

A very alluring blue asari with a rose color facial design approached where he stood and took the seat right next to him. He could smell her enticing sweet perfume from her skin and her clothes didn’t leave much to the imagination. He found himself having trouble with not staring at her. Was it sheer luck or perhaps even an assassin? He wouldn’t take his chance on either. The volus noticed her arrival and looked her way from his grill. “Can I help you?”

“I suggest the beef stick.” Bray tossed out casually to her, hoping to spark small talk with this very attractive woman beside him.

She smiled appreciatory at him with a wink. “I’ll take one of those.” Then she reached out and glided her fingertips up his arm. “What’s your name?”

“Bray.”

“Is it?” She moved a little closer and Bray tried his best not to get too excited accidentally by her proximity. “Then you are just the batarian that I was hoping to see.”

“Oh?” His could feel the waiver in his voice.

A datapad appeared in her other hand and she slid it across in front of him. He wondered where she kept it at. “A message from the Shadow Broker.”

Bray’s smile on his lips quickly dissipated and he glanced down. Dealing with the Shadow Broker and any of his agents was very serious and sometimes deadly. He picked up the pad and waiting for
the message to be decrypted. It said, “Shepard had no choice in what she did. She didn’t have time to warn the colonists. Destroy this pad completely after you read this and if the agent that gave this to you shows any sign that they know the contents of the message, then kill them.” Narrowing his eyes, Bray wondered what interest the Shadow Broker had to back Shepard. They had a lot of pull especially in the political realm. Why keep this secret? Why come to him? It didn’t make sense, but now he could be a target. He eyed the female beside him cautiously. “What does it say? It’s still encrypted.” He growled out at her in frustration. “Is this a joke?”

She looked at him and shrugged. “I only send the messages. Sorry.” With that, she slid off her seat and disappeared in the crowd of shoppers before the volus had time to finish preparing her meal. The rotunda shaped alien walked over to him holding two plates of food and rasped through his respirator. “Where did she go?”

Bray stood up from his chair. “I guess she didn’t like the company. I’ll take mine to go.”

“Bah.” The volus grabbed a box and put the contents in it for him. “Wasted food.”

“Just put hers with mine.” Bray instructed as he handed him his chit. His mind still on what the message said. Once his sack in hand, he moved towards his apartments and paused near where a trash shredder was located. Glancing around to make sure no one was really watching, he tossed the datapad in and waited for the satisfying sounds of the object being destroyed before moving on.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Aria strikes up a deal with the Illusive Man. Earth is not happy for Shepard's arrival.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 16

“Is there a problem?” Bray sized up on the asian man standing before him at the check-in counter. Every guest had to check in their weapons before entering the club. They could collect their things once exiting. However, the man who advised the bouncer working the front that he had information regarding Paul Johnson, didn’t seem to adhere to the house rules.

“I’m keeping my weapons.” The man gruffly answered.

“Then you don’t get in.” Bray pointed out as he crossed his arms. A krogan guard stepped in behind the man, but the newcomer didn’t flinch.

“Will I get them back?” He asked instead.

“Yes.”

The man eyed Bray carefully before handing over a knife and his gun to the Asari clerk at the counter. She carefully took the items and handed him a ticket for pickup verification. “Is that everything?” Bray asked him again.

“Yes.” The man had the same tone as Bray’s earlier response to him. This guy already pissed him off. “Do you want to search me?”

“I would have him do it.” Bray motioned to the krogan who didn’t leave yet.

“I don’t have anything else.” The human snarled

“Let’s go then.” Bray never kept his attention away from their guest as best as he could as he moved around the busy dance floor and straight to Aria’s booth where she and Sanak were waiting.

Aria didn’t rise to greet him and simply pointed for a chair for him to sit down in. Once he was seated, Bray turned and left to head down to his post where Anto was standing. The younger batarian gave him a slight glance before looking back towards the crowd. “Who is that?”

Bray shrugged. “Some guy.” He was careful on spilling out so much that he knew. Aria never disclosed who in her staff had special privileges. Some close to her didn’t have all the details that Bray knew and vice versa. Somehow, Aria kept a mental note of who she told. If word go out that someone found out something that they were not supposed to know, then the discloser could be vented out quickly. It was a way for her to keep things in checked. He didn’t like the idea that Sanak was up there and not him, but Sanak was more involved with the Grayson matter than him, plus he lost a few points dealing with Shepard on the station. Still no word from her.
Ten minutes later, the man walked out with Sanak and Aria beckoned him back up to her private booth. Her blue eyes followed Bray as he walked up to her booth that evening and took his post. His own eyes avoided her. She broke the awkward silence between them. “Has she contacted you?”

“How?” Bray knew damn well who she was referring to, and playing dumb was not going to really end the inquiry.

“Shepard,” She spat back in annoyance.

“No.” He quickly stated. It wasn’t a lie. But did Aria know that the Shadow Broker’s agent found him on the station? It was quite possible. He tested her limitations once. Only a fool would dare to do it again. “Who was that guy?”

“An agent for Cerberus.”

“What the hell do they want?” The announcement alarmed him. They were now dealing with a dangerous enemy in his eyes: The Illusive Man. The Shadow Broker could be just as dangerous, if not more. Both had their groups of talented agents: Spies and assassins.

“My concern.” She returned to their former subject. “I guess what they said on the extranet is true.” Aria tossed out casually as she leaned towards the table stand next to her to pick up her drink. “Most of that is garbage, but things have been quite interesting since she took out the Bahak System.” A thin smile traced across her purple lips. “She has guts. I will give that to her.” She paused and seemed to catch the dumbfounded state on his face. “You don’t know?” The very idea amused her. “She turned herself in and the Alliance has her in custody.”

“Then I guess she did it.” Bray neutrally commented. Leave it to Aria to get all the details first.

“You think the Hegemony will be satisfied now?” She prodded.

“I thought Omega doesn’t care about this.” Coldness filled his voice as he could feel himself tense up.

“It doesn’t.” Aria narrowed her eyes. Playtime was over with. She got the response that she didn’t want to hear. “Shepard will no longer be on the station and things will cool down. I already lost a few workers to Khar’ Shaan. Surprised you didn’t jump ship with them.”

“It’s not my place.” Bray calmly spoke. His past was well disregarded for certain reasons, but Aria always found a way to get the dirt on everyone that she dealt with. Desertion among the Hegemony was taken very serious. So serious that if he was ever found, then he could be executed. No one was around to listen in on their conversation, but Aria never held this over him before. He wondered if this would now be used to blackmail him to keep him checked. Would she sink so low? If it was in her favor, he wouldn’t put it past her. He turned to look squarely at her. “I’m with Omega. You know that.”

Aria stared him down for a few long seconds, before smiling bigger. “Lighten up, Bray. Just be glad that I didn’t send you with Sanak.”

“Oh?”

“I sent him and a team to locate Kahlee Sanders that my new business partner told me about.” She disclosed. She would not openly admit that she was working with a known anti-alien organization, but the creds were too high to not pass up; plus, she wanted to find the man responsible
for her daughter’s murder. The Illusive Man graciously disclosed to her that it was in fact Paul Johnson aka Paul Grayson who murdered her daughter. He admitted to having Grayson, a former Cerberus agent, infiltrate her ranks to get close to her and transmit information to her. He also advised that Grayson was a known red sand junkie and the prize that he and Sanak took from the Talons must have been too great to pass up. Now he was on the run from not just Omega, but Cerberus. The Illusive Man passed along a name to a person of interest to them: Kahlee Sanders. Bray never heard of her, but their vague partner assured if Grayson reached out to anyone for asylum, that it would be her. Finding her would be the key to capturing Grayson. The only choice for Aria was that when she had the murderer and rogue agent, would she hand him over or save his end for herself. The Illusive Man wanted him alive, and Aria agreed to deliver, but that would not stop her once she had him in her clutches.

There was another thing that the Illusive Man wanted. When Krysta took out the Collector home base in the Omega 4 Relay, she left the structure intact. There were tons of salvage and valuable data that the Illusive Man desired on the other side. The only problem was that he didn’t have the means to have ships go back and forth to the station to collect and analyze. There were no local planets close by for docking. The closest port was Omega. Aria tried to play it off like she would keep the information for herself, but actuality she had no desire to use it whatsoever. She wasn’t too keen on the idea of the Blue Suns bringing the Collectors aboard Omega years ago when they wanted Shepard’s body. The Illusive Man assured that all organic life aboard the vessel was dead. Surprisingly, Aria agreed for the use of her station, but for a considerable sum of creds. “Once I deal with Grayson, then I will need you to keep Cerberus in check while they are on this station.”

“Understood.”

The hover armored transport vehicle slowed outside the Alliance Headquarters in San Francisco. A sea of reporters, supporters and protestors, swamped the vessel, shoving one another in hopes to get the first glimpse of the shamed former first human Spectre and ex-Alliance Commander. A very athletically built marine was in the seat next to Krysta. He had a military style buzz cut hairstyle and looked like he was a few years out of the academy. Before departing her prior location, he introduced himself as James Vega. He stated that he was assigned specifically there by Captain David Anderson to escort her and guard her until the hearing took place. She never heard Anderson speak of this man before and wasn’t too sure on how the two knew each other or why he would be selected. He didn’t appear to be an assassin donned in Alliance attire with some fake story so she decided to trust him…diligently. Vega tapped his ear comm then glanced over at two more officers that were there for guard duty. Krysta had on handcuffs in the front of her lap, but it was merely for show. “Okay, we got bunch of people out there. Our backup will create a path. I want each of you to take her side while I take point. Keep a look out for any snipers or ambushes.”

“You really think they will take me out in the open? Krysta was a bit alarmed by the spectacle outside.

“The batarians have a death mark on you and some believe you have dragged Earth into another war.” Vega rose up from his seat to head to the door.

“We don’t have time to fight the batarians.” Krysta protested as she followed him. She felt so strange with handcuffs on her wrists. “The Reapers could be here soon.”

“I believe you, Commander.” James turned around to look at her. “I’m not the one you have to convince.”
“You believe that I intentionally killed all those colonists out there?” She pressed, taking notice that the officers that were with them remained silent.

James clenched his jaw and remained tight lip. “I don’t know…Anderson doesn’t.” It seemed everyone was questioning her integrity.

Krysta sighed painfully. “Just go.”

Vega tapped his comm again. “We ready?” He waited a few seconds and then nodded his head to the others. “Let’s move!”

As soon as the doors to the transport opened, Krysta tried to shield her eyes from the glaring bright light of the sun that was pressing down from the sky. Then a flood of voices called out to her. Their disharmonic audio mixed with a blur of questions, shouts of love and support, anti-batarian slogans and hatred for her in general. The many groups clashed and began to argue with one another. Local law enforcement was already placed in multiple junctions to try to keep the peace as best as possible. Vega led the charge towards the doors that would take them into the facility. Luckily, it was a short walk. The longer her presence was in the open, the more of a spark she was to ignite a fury mob. She allowed her eyes to dart around the crowd to see all eyes transfixed upon her. She could feel the guards behind her at her heels, eager to get away from this scene. “Keep up!” Vega shouted over the noise as he quickened their pace.

Moments later, they were inside the facility, but the shouts from outside were not gone. Many were beating on the glass, determined to get inside. Several guards from within ushered over to accept the prisoner transfer. Vega snapped to salute and held out a datapad with the order for his assignment. The higher-ranking officer in front of him glanced over the instructions with a judging demeanor, but his serious facial expression never faltered. “Take the prisoner upstairs to her designated quarters. I’ll have my lieutenant meet you there.”

“Where’s Anderson?” Krysta asked James as they walked towards her room and then she noticed she was still in cuffs. “Can I get these damn things off already? I thought you said it was for show.”

“Oh, sorry.” He stopped and removed the cuffs. “Don’t know. He picked me up on Omega awhile back.”

This didn’t make any sense to her. After all they went through with Saren, would he dare turn his back on her now? “What were you doing on Omega, James?”

Vega flashed a grin back at her. “Having a good time.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Krysta Shepard is waiting on her trial while Aria deals with a new threat on her station.

The two unconscious bloody bodies were on the floor, nearly on top of another. They were brought in through Afterlife’s secret back entrance door to avoid unwanted attention. Aria remained quiet as she looked upon the two humans that Sanak’s team retrieved. The woman had blonde hair, Bray noted it was the same color as Krysta’s. She appeared to be older and one hand was mangled with the fingers deformed, clearly need to be set. The other was a male with darker skin complexion. His bloody face branded an obvious fractured nose. Bray recognized the male. He had seen him before on vids years ago when word buzzed on the net about Commander Shepard chosen as the first human Spectre and the war against Saren Arterius. Captain David Anderson spoke highly about her and was interviewed by several networks following the Geth attack on the Citadel. He was elected by humanity to be the first human Council member instead of the obvious choice of Councilor Udina who handled human matters for years on the Citadel.

Obviously, Aria had no idea that Anderson accompanied Sanders. Either the Illusive Man was not aware either or he didn’t bother to mention that detail. This infuriated Aria. If Anderson’s kidnapping was brought into the limelight and was traced back to Omega, it could bring more unwanted attention to the station. Perhaps, this was more than Aria hoped for. She would save face and never disclose it. Bray knew that. “They were a handful,” Sanak boasted. “I took care of it.”

“Yes, and you brought an extra person.” Aria pointed out in irritation.

“He got in the way.” Sanak proclaimed. “Thought he may be useful when we extract the information from her.”

Bray remained quiet, listening in on the conversation. As much as he hated to say, his counterpart was right. Torture was not an effective way to get information from people. When the pain became so unbearable, then the person on the receiving end would just blurt out whatever they could to make the pain stop. Fact or fiction. Though, if the torture was given to Anderson, then it could make the extraction a lot faster and they could keep him prisoner to make sure the truth was given to them. Aria just had to be careful though. “Patch them up and take them to one of the suites.”

Sanak grumbled as he grunted for the krogan that accompanied him to assist in transporting their guests to the suite. “Bray?” Aria called out to him.

“Yeah?”

“Make sure there was no trace of Anderson’s whereabouts to Omega. I want this under wraps. Got it?”
“Crystal.” He moved to head down to intel to see what data they could harvest. He agreed. They really didn’t need the Alliance here. If word got out, the Hegemony may move in due to being in the Terminus systems and the battle between the two races would be on Omega. If that happened, either way he would most likely be killed. Either as a casualty of war or by the Hegemony.

Two months had passed since Shepard was taken into custody. At least the room they gave her was not a cell, but more of a private bedroom. She thought back to the cryo cell that Jack endured while on Purgatory. She began to wonder what the ex-convict was now up to. Did she rebut to her old ways and join up with some friends to rob ships and run amuck? Krysta jokingly thought about getting a tattoo to remember her time in lockup to brag to Jack. The waiting to just be heard was atrocious and she wondered just how long she would have to wait. Would she be killed by the Reapers right there in her room? Was anyone doing anything to improve their defenses? Probably not. It seemed like high command had the same mentality as the Council did when she warned them about Saren. The Council failed to listen to her about Saren and wanted to deny the warnings about the Reapers and the Collectors. “All those batarians died for nothing…” Krysta sighed hard as she cupped her face with her hands and then pulled her knees to her chest. And what about Bray? There was no word from him. No word from anyone. She wondered if Liara’s team found him on Omega. She was sure that they did and maybe their message really didn’t get through to him. Why would she blame him? If the roles were reversed, would she believe he had no part in killing three hundred thousand humans in one system? That was the beauty of past aggressions, they still seem to hold a grudge in all species and the alien racism never ceased. The melting pot known as the Citadel still had cracks in its foundation where old habits die hard.

A light rap at the door made Krysta spring up in a straighter sitting position. It was odd that the guest didn’t use the door’s greet system. “Hello?” She asked. She assumed her room was locked so she couldn’t possibly grant the person on the other side access.

The door whished open and James walked in holding a plate of food. “Brought lunch.” He set the tray down. It contained a piece of baked chicken, one scoop of sloppy potatoes and a few green beans thrown about.

“Wow…thanks.” Krysta tossed out sarcastically as she winched at the smell of the food. She knew what the food should smell like, but it was not what she was smelling.

James winked and reached into his pocket and pulled up a wrapped-up ham sub. “I saved this from my lunch for you. Got it across the street at some new deli that popped up.”

Krysta was taken back by his generosity and graciously chose the half sub over the tray. “Any news yet? Or are they going to keep me in here till I’m fat and lazy?” She spoke out before taking a satisfying bite of the sandwich.

“No. Believe me, I’m trying to push as hard as I can. Word is that they are setting up a hearing soon. Then you can get back out there. Political bullshit.” He grumbled. “Look, Commander.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“What?”

“Technically, they deactivated my status. I no longer hold any rank.” Krysta explained before taking another bite.

“Fine. Shep. I believe you. I mean it’s tough having to make quick calls. The people that sit around making decisions don’t see what you and I go through.”
“I appreciate the support, James, but I don’t think it will do me any good.” She then thought back to Anderson. Now, there was a man that could pull some strings. He always had her back, even when she was a complete bitch to him in the earlier stages of her career. He never held her accountable for what happened on Torfan. “Anderson back? I need to get a message to him.”

“Heard he left the Citadel right after you were taken into custody. Just gave his resignation and left the station. No one has heard from him and no one knows where he went.”

The news mortified Krysta. She nearly choked on the bite of food left in her mouth. It was not in his character to just disappear like that. Unless something was wrong. “If he left, then who….” Fear crept in the back of her mind as she tried to decipher the cryptic message.

“Udina.” James quickly replied with a groan. “He’s an ass. I would never vote for him.”

“One thing you and I agree on, James.” Krysta pushed the uneaten sandwich aside. A knot formed in her stomach about David’s fate and she lost her appetite. “Any visitors or messages?”

James solemnly shook his head. “Nada. The whole place is loco. I thought they were your team, Shep. I mean if I was on there, I would be here for you.”

Krysta frowned sadly. “Thought they were too…”

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Bray stood at his post at Aria’s private lavish booth. He was on edge, waiting for Sanak and his team to return with Grayson. Aria dispatched them to the designated warehouse owned by her with Kahlee Sanders. With their hostage, she was confident that Sanak’s team could handle whatever they faced. How much of a threat could one runaway man be? Even if he was armed, he certainly couldn’t take down asari huntresses and a pair of krogan. Bray didn’t like the idea that Sanak was chosen to lead the team instead of him. After all, the batarian and Grayson had a past together and Sanak would not care if his personal feelings got in the way. “Lighten up.” Aria could sense that her bodyguard was tense as he kept his focus towards the club’s entrance.

Bray scowled. “They have been gone too long. I should send reinforcements.”

Aria paused as if she was carefully deciding to take Bray up on his offer or not. Before she had a chance to make that decision, an asari from Sanak’s team came from the back entrance. Her young blue face plagued with horror. “Aria!” She gasped in between breaths. A gash was on the side of her head and fresh blood covered her face.

Bray quickly ushered her closer and stood to block onlookers. He recognized her to be Nosix, one of the new members of Sanak’s team. An adept biotic. Very capable of holding her own and probably could kick his ass with a singularity attack alone. Her face expressed that everything went to hell. “What’s the matter?” Aria’s voice hinted with alarm, but remained composed. She stood up from her couch to greet her.

“Something is wrong with Grayson. He has some kind of cybernetics!” Nosix’s eyes wide as she was reliving the hellish nightmare she just witnessed first-hand. “Sanak…and the others…” Her voice shook.

“Yes?” Aria urged her on.

“He’s dead. All of them. I never seen anyone like that before.” Nosix shook her head feverishly. “He’s not human anymore.”
Aria’s eyes narrowed to barely slits as she chewed over what was given to her. Rage was building inside of her. Cerberus, once again, withheld information. Information that cost her men’s lives. Now, there was a loose deadly cybernetic human running on the station. Her station. Bray remained still as he tried to process the fact that Sanak was dead. Course, he hated the bastard, but he never wanted him to go down that way. Just what was up with Grayson? “Bray, take a group. All the heavy hitters you can muster. Spread out and deal with it.” Her words were cool and collective, but her tone gave away her true feelings. Once this threat was dealt with, then she was going to have a chat with the Illusive Man.

“I’m on it.” He turned to carry out the order.

“Bray?” She called back to him.

“Yeah?” He whirled around to face her once more.

“Stay alive. I need someone to replace Sanak when this is over.”

“I will.” He moved towards the armory below and tapped his ear comm. “I need everyone to meet in the armory now. Code red. This is not a fucking drill so get your asses moving.” What was he about to face out there?
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Bray tries to find Grayson before he wrecks more havoc on the station. Will he be able to handle him or face the same fate as Sanak?

Sh’sk copyrighted to me

Storyline follows the novel Retribution

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 18

“The bastard has been through here.” Bray noted as his squad paused a few blocks from the club. Grayson was too close to Afterlife, too close for any type of comfort. The street was abandoned, and two poor merchants who tried to stay to protect their shops paid the ultimate price. Their bodies contorted in unnatural positions and thrown upon the counters. No ordinary person could have done what they did, not even a krogan.

“This is bad, guys.” Nosix whispered. “I’m telling you that Grayson is not right. I’ve never see anyone have the power that he does. Not even a higher-class huntress.”

“It’s just one man.” Rax, the pale yellow krogan bellowed. The sadistic display did not break him one bit. His reptilian eyes scanned their surroundings. “Grow a quad. Thought you were a huntress?” He tossed out insultingly.

“I am!” Nosix snapped back. “You weren’t there!” She spun on her heel to square up with the red facial marking krogan, who returned her gaze with an expression of being unimpressed.

“What about Sanders?” Bray broke up their argument, trying to keep them focused, while they waited for the other group to meet them up with them.

“She and the other guy fled.” Nosix calmed herself to address his inquiry.

“Both?” Bray sighed in frustration. “Damn Sanak. Why the hell did he take both of them?” Aria wouldn’t like the fact that her Alliance prisoner also escaped, but that was a matter for another time. Up ahead, he saw their team jogging up to their location. He waited until they were close before addressing them, “Where the hell have you been?” It was a safer bet to go up against Grayson with six of them versus three.

The other batarian wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. “Checked out a few warehouses nearby. Thought they may be hiding there.” He glanced around. “Where the hell is, Anto?”

“Inside with Aria.” Bray shortly responded. Anto seemed to have the cushier of the positions
whenever trouble lurked at the station. If he was not out there, then perhaps Aria trusted he and Sh’sk to handle whatever they were about to face. “Let’s check out the dock. He may be trying to leave.”

“Good riddance to him.” Sh’sk commented as he took Bray’s side to lead their teams ahead.

Bray paused in midstride and glanced back at Nosix, Rax, and the two other batarians that accompanied Sh’sk. “Shit...what if he double backs to the club? If he killed Liselle, then what’s to stop him to take Aria out?”

“Aria can handle him.” Rax chortled in amusement. “I wouldn’t be worried about her.”

“I hope she can.” Nosix meekly added. The asari was clearly traumatized by the earlier events. “Goddess, I hope so.”

Sh’sk thumbed back to Afterlife. “Want me to check it out?” They both knew that Anto couldn’t stop Grayson if the ex-Cerberus agent decided to take out Aria before he left the station dead or alive.

Bray considered the choice carefully. They had no idea really where Grayson was. If he wasn’t at the docks, then he may be heading back to Afterlife as they spoke or if he was stupid, he would be lurking somewhere within the bowels of the station. He lived on the station for many years before he turned against them. He knew various locations, not all the key places, but well enough to hide if he wanted and not be found for weeks or months. If he was as powerful as Nosix claimed, then why would he hide? Bray could send Sh’sk’s entire team back to the club, then it would cut their survival chances in half if they went up against Grayson at the docks. Omega was their top priority and that included Aria T’Loak. “Rax, get back there.” He ushered the krogan along. “Try to get your ass back fast.”

Rax curled his upper lip back as if he was offended by the order. “Fine.” He lumbered back to Afterlife.

Bray waved the others to follow him. As he was jogging towards their destination, he checked the clip on his rifle and triple checked that he had sufficient rounds inside. If they became in an intense firefight, then he may not have time to switch out another magazine. Every shot had to count. He wasn’t equipped with biotics like Nosix and Sh’sk were.

Moving swiftly through the streets, Bray’s squad reached their destination, but there was no sign of Grayson. “Fan out. Check every ship.” Bray commanded as he moved down the strip next to each berth, making sure that his team members were carefully inspecting the ships that he passed. He could feel the tiny hairs on his skin rise in anticipation of an ambush. His heart pounded in his chest, he listened so carefully for any sound at all. He could hear his own breath escape through his mouth and nostrils. His fingers glided over the stock of his weapon, his finger rested on the trigger. What would Grayson look like now? Seeing an empty space ahead, he cursed silently and jogged to it. Tapping into the numbered space’s terminal, he pulled up the specs to note that the ship just departed about fifteen minutes before his team arrived. Clearly, enough time for their query to get past Omega’s weapon systems before being targeted. Five more spots down another empty space. He didn’t bother checking that terminal. Most likely, all three of their “guests” departed. He hoped they didn’t dare come back. Wherever they went, they were someone else’s trouble. Sh’sk took his side. “They gone?” He asked the obvious.

“Yeah. Looks like it. Not a word to anyone.” Bray said quietly as he glanced around. He would report this directly to Aria and calmly. If word got out that she lost a threat to her station, it may look bad. A weak spot in her structure. No, she would announce that the threat was handled and driven
off the station. There was no reason why Grayson, Kahlee or David Anderson would return to Omega now. As far as he was concerned, he would never have to see them again.

When they made it back to Afterlife, they carefully moved towards the undisclosed back entrance. A few of Aria’s men were dragging the lifeless bodies of Sanak’s team. Aria overlooked the procession from the doorway. Her face was neutral in expression, but her eyes would not downplay how she really felt. Sorrow and disgust filled them. She noticed Bray and the others arriving back. “Did you find him?”

Bray shook his head. “No. He left the station before we made it to the docks.”

“What about Sanders and Anderson?”

“Gone as well.”

The news didn’t bode well with T’Loak. “You took too long.” The chance to get back at her daughter’s murderer eluded her. The interaction with Cerberus did not go well at all. Aria would remember this. She went back inside. He knew she was going to speak with the Illusive Man at once. No one crossed Aria. No one.

Bray paused at Sanak’s bloody body. Bullet holes riddled his corpse. Most likely, Grayson was armed, but why bother shooting Sanak when the display of his powers clearly showed he could do so much more effective damage to him? Did someone else kill him? Was it Anderson? Quite the possibility, but it didn’t matter now. They were gone. Bray paused over his body and noticed that all four eyes were kept open. It was a custom for batarian burials for the eyes to remain open since they believed the soul would escape that way to their own afterlife. Most alien races knew of this and didn’t really care. During battles, their enemies would intentionally close the eyes out of spite. Thankfully, the turians and krogans that were tasked to deliver the casualties back must have remembered their traditions and didn’t close them since most other species closed the eyes of their dead. Sanak’s final expression was a bit haunting. A look of shock and surprise as his life departed from him. He wasn’t expecting for whatever befell upon him. “Better him than me,” Bray thought.

END OF MASS EFFECT 2
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Omega is attacked by adjutants and Cerberus. Will Bray and Aria survive?

Mass Effect Solace
Chapter 19

The asteroid station’s klaxon wails startled Bray out of his slumber in his apartment that day. He arrived at his apartment about an hour before the rude awakening from working the night shift at the club. His clothes were haphazardly on the floor from disrobing. In the darkness, he fumbled around to find his omni tool, only to remember in his drowsy stupor of the room’s interior computer programmed lighting. “Lights full percent now, damnit!” He snapped. It had been a long time since Omega ever had to use their alarm system. Something big must be happening. But where? And what was it? Slipping on his omni, he contacted Anto since he was up next on guard duty. “What is going on?!”

“I don’t know what the fuck it is!” Anto’s voice screamed back. It was hard to make out the other’s response from the mixture of screams and gunfire in the background. “Get your ass here!” The comm went silent.

The cryptic message didn’t make things better and Bray stumbled to put on his clothes as his mind raced and his heart beat against his chest in rapid succession. Anto’s voice was filled with too much of panic and fear to think it was some gang trying to overtake the station. It was not uncommon for one of the bigger players to try their luck to get the best of Aria and rule Omega for themselves. Many tried and many failed. It kept the merc gangs in check so one couldn’t get too powerful. Grabbing some clips, he slung his rifle strap over his shoulder and jolted out of the door, not bothering to set the alarm. He had to make it to the club.

When he arrived at the epicenter of the chaos, he realized it was just outside of Afterlife. Civilians were throwing themselves over one another to try to get out of the way. He had to push his way through the sea of panicked residents who were trying to go the way he came. “Out of the way!” He snarled as he struggled to get past through them. They were bottlenecking at the doors. He saw many of Aria’s forces with their backs turned to him squaring up with the unknown assailant or assailants. It was hard to see what was going on. Defeated, he took a side street to veer another direction to his destination. It was longer, and the route would take him from the apartments towards the markets. Street vendors were all closed with some hiding cowardly behind their kiosks and praying to their gods. A few caught his passing and recognized him as one of Aria’s people. A volus called out to him. “You, there! What is going on? Is Aria dealing with this?!”

Bray ignored him and moved ahead. Finally reaching the battle, he saw many Omega citizens on the ground in a bloody bath. A few grotesque creatures deceased as well with their glowing blue blood pooling out from their bodies. Their mechanized hollowed eyes staring up at him in a haunting fashion. A cold chill coursed through his body. He saw Anto standing beside Aria with fear plastered over his face. It looked like he faced death and probably crapped his pants. Aria met his stare. “What took you?”
“Couldn’t get through the crowds.” Bray admitted as he crouched down to examine the weird creature, but made sure he kept his distance. He felt the tiny hairs on his skin raise up as if he was expecting the deceased monstrosity to just spark to life and attack him. “Where did they come from? What are they?”

“Came from a shipment.” Anto chimed in, joining in on the discussion. “Call originated from the docks. We are trying to track down which one now.”

“Make it a priority.” Aria kept her voice neutral. “I lost many today. I need to know who is responsible and make them pay.”

Bray could understand her trouble. First, it was the loss after dealing with Grayson and now this. The decrease in manpower could show a weakness to the gangs. She had to show she was still in control. He rose up to await her next order. “Bray, take some men and check the nearby streets near the docks. Make sure there are none left.”

“I’m on it.” He moved over to gather a few of her troops.

“Don’t let them touch you. It seems if they do, you will turn to them.” She pointed out.

When Bray returned hours later with his team, he discovered that during his absence, Aria was in contact with Cerberus once again and took her personal ship to meet up with General Oleg Patrovesky. Disturbingly, Anto claimed to Bray that Aria placed him directly in charge while she was away temporarily.

“Why the hell did she go alone?” Bray paced in the back room while Anto sat comfortably on the plush purple couch, taking in some ale from their private server. They didn’t stay out on the floor because clubgoers would recognize them without Aria around and wonder what was up. If they stayed out of sight, then it was business as usual. Aria was in a backroom handling her affairs and didn’t want to be disturbed.

Anto shrugged. “She can take care of herself.” He chuckled a little. “I feel sorry for them if they piss her off.” The batarian did have a point. Aria was a very strong biotic and earned quite the reputation throughout her hundred years previously as a maiden.

“How long was the meeting planned for?” Bray checked the time again on his omni. It had been three hours since he arrived back at the club and no sign of Aria and no word. He knew she didn’t like leaving her station and only briefly when she went to mourn for her daughter.

A surly dark yellow toned krogan walked in with an asari huntress paired up beside him. Bray recognized the krogan from the security team and the huntress from intel. Like many asari, the huntress had a very attractive form with light pink facial markings; her recognizable feature. “Aria’s ship is missing.” She reported.

“Missing?” Anto lifted an eye ridge. “Is the Cerberus vessel still nearby?” Bray had a bad taste in his mouth from hearing the news. It was what he feared.

“One is also gone.” The huntress responded calmly with her blue eyes looking at the duo for orders. “Should I send out a search party?”

Bray held his breath as he looked over at Anto. He knew what he wanted to do, but he wanted to see what kind of order Anto would place. He always depicted the batarian as power hungry and ambitious. Would he disappoint? “Your call. You’re in charge.”

“She wouldn’t abandon Omega.” Anto rose up from the couch. “If her ship is gone, then she’s dead.”
“Dead?” The huntress’ eyes went wide with fear and sadness. The krogan remained silent, taking it all in. Bray knew that the statement could be very dangerous, especially for the stability of the station.

“She has to be dead.” Anto put his glass down. “Cerberus got the best of her and she fell for it. She put me in charge when she left, so that makes me the new ruler of Omega.”

Bray scoffed at the declaration. “You? There’s no fucking way the merc groups would just do what you say.”

“They will once they know what I can do for them.” Anto argued.

“Bullshit. You’re not Aria.” Bray shook his head. “The station will go to hell. We need to be ready.”

“What do you suggest?” The krogan finally joined in.

“Can we just not tell anyone?” The asari spoke up.

“It will get out. We know.” Bray took a breath as he tried to quickly assess their dire situation.

“I won’t tell anyone!” The huntress protested.

“You would and so would he and perhaps all of us…with the proper motivation.” Bray flatly stated.

The krogan chuckled. “Creds always make someone talk.”

“I just didn’t mean that- “

“We can just kill you.” Anto hissed threateningly at the krogan as he took out his pistol and pointed it at the larger alien.

“I’d love to see you try.” This made the krogan laugh some more.

“We need to send out our top officers as emissaries to the merc groups. We need to make alliances with some. The station will consume itself if we don’t.” Bray hated to be in this position that they were in. Violence and chaos would flow like lava from a deadly volcano. Everyone on Aria’s team was marked and some would soon take sides to avoid death. They had to act fast and stay ahead of everything.

“I’m in charge!” Anto snapped.

“Don’t be foolish!” Bray growled back at him.

Anto shoved Bray to the side to get the huntress’ and the krogan’s attention. “Aria put me in charge before she left. I’m taking over this station! You will do what I say. Is that clear?”

Growling, Bray pulled Anto away and delivered a strong blow to the center of his face with his fist. The impactbusted his large nostril and blood splattered down. Anto recoiled as he covered his bloody nose and glared at his attacker. He swung back at Bray and caught him in the rib cage. Biting through the pain, Bray delivered an upper cut and struck Anto’s face again.

The huntress used a biotic barrier that warped over Bray blocking him from any more contact with Anto. The electric charged hummed all around him. He looked back at the asari in anger. She took a breath. “Anto’s in charge. Aria did it.” She agreed with the other.

“Just let them kill each other.” The krogan shrugged as he moved towards the door. “I’ll go back to
my post.

“I’ll get to the club to make the announcement. I’ll get the mercs to listen to me.”

“You are a damn idiot!” Bray shouted through the barrier. Once he was out of the room, the huntress finally released her biotic hold. He shot her an icy glare.

“I’m sorry. I’m loyal to Aria.” She admitted solemnly.

“She’s still alive. You’re an idiot to follow Anto.” He moved to grab his weapon.

“What are you going to do?” She watched on.

“I’m taking a team to make sure no more of those things come back or Cerberus. She’s not dead.”

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“Sector Zeta Eight and Upsilon Five are clear.” Sh’sk checked off another section on his holo map.

“You sure those things are still here?”

“I want to be sure.” Bray’s feet were hurting him after walking through the many streets of the station. “Maybe check the mine next?”

Suddenly, an announcement came through the station’s intercom that kept them in place. “This station is now under Cerberus control. We have secured the club and have infantry patrolling. Do not use force against us or you will be killed. This is for your own good.”

“Fuck…” The one thing that Bray feared came true. Cerberus had Aria and now had Omega. They didn’t have the manpower alone to overtake Cerberus. Not unless the merc groups banded together and their differences would not allow that to happen.

Sh’sk followed him over to the next corner that turned and saw Cerberus scanning civilians and letting them pass over single file to a new area of the station. “What do we do now?”

“Cerberus probably has the register of every person on Aria’s payroll. There’s no way they would let us just walk around the station. We can’t go through that checkpoint.” Bray pondered their next move. “We will need to find another way to the underground bunker. If Anto is smart, then he would be there. That’s Aria’s fall back point.”

“You think they hit that already?” Sh’sk moved away from the corner to make sure they were not in sight.

“I hope not. Let’s go find out.”

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Anto scowled when he saw Bray and Sh’sk arriving at the bunker. Only a handful of Aria’s people were there. “I thought you were captured,” he grumbled.

“You wish I was.” Bray scanned the bunker and shook his head. “This is it?”

“Yeah. Didn’t have time to send the alert out.” Anto explained as he looked on. “None of the merc groups are willing to help. They are fighting each other. The Suns took most of the Talon’s territory and the Eclipse are toppling the Blood Pack. The sections without fighting are under Cerberus control.”

“Like I said. You’re not Aria.” Bray firmly reminded him.
“Neither are you!” Anto snapped at him angrily. “Quit saying that!”

“You’re both right. I am.” A voice called from the back of the bunker. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked in that direction. A familiar figure approached from within the shadows with a look of displeasure on her face. It was Aria T’Loak herself.

“Aria!” The men cheered.

A wave of comfort overtook Bray as he saw her standing there proudly. She was scorned, but she was vengeful. He knew she just wouldn’t abandon the station like that. “Glad you are back. “He smiled as he approached her. “What are you orders?”

“To get Cerberus the hell off my station.”

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“We got Cerberus coming up on our left!” Bray shouted to Sh’sk as he popped in another magazine. He made sure it was secure before popping back over from his hiding spot to unleash a barrage of gunfire into the charging forces. The armor piercing rounds tore through their kinetic shields, damaging their armor. The few unfortunate soldiers in the front groaned as the bullets struck their flesh and vulnerable organs before collapsing in a pile.

“More engineers coming up behind! Watch out for those damn turrets!” Sh’sk screamed over the hail of bullets as he tried to use his rifle to hone in on the approaching engineers. It was hard to peg any of them due to the numbers of troops in front. With the mercs finally working together, they were able to push ahead towards the Afterlife, the home base for Cerberus.

“I see a clearing! I’m going for it!” Anto exclaimed as he hurled himself over the concrete barrier to move towards the club’s entrance. It was eerie for not a line of clubgoers wanting to get in.

“Anto!” Aria yelled to get his attention to come back to where she was on the opposite side of the street from Bray’s team. “You idiot!” It was naïve to run into the club thinking it was clear. Bray didn’t want to risk his life to go after him. Surprisingly, Aria leaped over the vendor kiosk that she was using as cover and charged in the direction that the batarian went.

“What do we do now?” Sh’sk hunkered down beside Bray to avoid the opposing gun fire.

Bray glanced at Aria and gritted his teeth. She was exposed and most likely, Cerberus, was aware of her location. They had to keep the forces pinned. He moved back up and squeezed the trigger. “Open fire!” Sh’sk and the others stood up and followed suit. Their rounds finding their marks and dropping the soldiers, exposing the engineers that were still setting up the turrets. With their backs turned, the engineers were easy prey and their bodies shook violently from the onslaught before collapsing onto their own devices.

The ground shook and Bray swore under his breath as he saw an Atlas approaching with another round of Cerberus soldiers. “Here we go!”

Sh’sk grabbed Bray’s arm tightly and jerked him down out of harm’s way. He glanced over at the club. “She’s in there by herself. Go in there!”

Bray chewed his lip before finally pushing up and moving towards the club. He hated to leave his team, but he knew his friend was right. He just hoped they could handle what Cerberus was about to dish out.

The club was in disarray. The normal brightly lit screens that displayed advertisements when
attendees first walked in were shattered and the room was dark. Bodies were still lingering on the floor and the whole hallway smelled of death. Most likely, their bodies were left as a sign to anyone who still had fight in them to try to take over the club. Up ahead, the main doors were partially opened, and the main dance floor room was exposed. This time there were no exotic dancers nor pounding techno music. His eyes caught Aria standing on the opposite side of the club near her private booth. He couldn’t tell what she was doing. As he approached, he noticed Anto’s body on the table. His head snapped back in an unnatural position. “Adjutants. He was too idealistic. Thinking he could come here and save the day.” She spoke out to Bray as he walked up to her side. “I hated him.”

The comment was unexpected, and she wondered if she truly meant that. If she hated him, why would she place him in charge while she was gone? “He wanted your job.” He muttered as he looked away from the grotesque scene. Another one of his acquaintances dead before him. How long would it be before he befell the same fate?

“Of course, he did.” Aria turned to him. “They all do.”

“More adjutants are coming! We are trying to hold them off!” Sh’sk’s fear driven voice crackled through the comm.

Bray tightened his grip on his rifle and jerked his head towards the club doors. “I need to get back out there.”

“No.” Aria’s face became dark. “We can’t fight Cerberus and the adjutants. I’ll deal with Cerberus and whatever is in here. I want you to find an escape pod and get off Omega.”

The order was tangent, and Bray shook his head defiantly. “No, Aria. I can’t leave this place.”

“Bray.” She said sternly. “I’m not giving you the option to choose. I need you alive.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll deal with Patrovesky. There’s an escape pad in my private quarters. Get your ass on there now. I’ll find you.” Her blue eyes moved ahead towards her next destination. She seemed to know where she would find her foe, and this was a fight for her alone. Pride was getting the better of her. She gave him one more silent glance before he turned to carry out her order and moved towards her private room. As instructed, the escape pod was still available, and he scrambled to get inside. He pressed the panel to commence the startup procedure. Buckling himself in, he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths while the engines warmed up. Seconds later, a quick jolt as the pod unhooked itself from the station and the propulsion system jettisoned him towards its predetermined course. He gripped his seat as the inertia and G forces slammed him tightly into the seat. For almost a moment, he blacked out.

Once the pod switched to autopilot mode, the path became smoother and the interior lights flickered to provide more light inside the cabin. Bray leaned his head against the wall and looked up at the metal ceiling. The onboard navigational system showed him move further away from Omega and closer to the fueling depot still in Saharabark system. He had no idea what was going on the station. He hoped that Sh’sk and the others were able to hold their own against the adjutants. For now, he closed his eyes and forced his body and mind to rest.

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A high pierced chirp interrupting his slumber and Bray groggily looked towards the terminal screen to see that there was an incoming transmission. He tapped the accept button and waited for the response. “Bray. This is Aria. I had to leave. Meet me at the new coordinates. I will upload now.”
The radio then went silent.

He plugged the new coordinates into his navigational system and felt the pod turning direction to comply.

Two hours later, he was on the transport ship that T'Loak took off Omega. He could tell by her eyes that she would not disclose her reasoning on why she also abandoned the station. “Where to now?” He had no idea what she was thinking, and it wasn’t like there were many places that could accommodate her.

“I’m going to get my station back, Bray.” She replied to him calmly as she walked back towards the pilot controls. “But for now, I need help. You can get it for me.”

Bray scratched his head by the unclarity. “I can?”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

While Ashley fighting for her life, Krysta starts to understand that it's time to be ruthless again. She cannot be nice anymore with dealing with the Reapers and now the Illusive Man. Liara fears for her change and her refusal to deal with Aria may ruin what she had with Bray.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE CHAPTER 20

She hated waiting...waiting for the Alliance to finally decide on her fate...waiting for someone to finally accept the truth...the Reapers were coming. The Reapers were not waiting. She had been in lock up for over six months and that was precious time taken away from her. Krysta Shepard had no idea what the Alliance brass was doing in those six months. Were they bolstering their defenses in preparation? She seriously doubted it. Her arguments for the Reapers fell upon deaf years ever since she had contact with Saren on Eden Prime. She always been black and white and clearly the evidence was there. How could one overlook the obvious? Yet, the Council turned their backs on her, even when she saved their asses from Sovereign. They still denied the truth. Now, with everything at stake, the Alliance held her to maintain political stability. Within a few months, she lost contact with pretty much the outside world. Her old team fell out of touch. What were they doing? Did they move on? Were they ready? Where was Anderson this whole time? Would he be present for her hearing? He was instrumental in her argument that she needed to be free. She needed time to prepare...if she had time left. Would he even show? No word on him. James said he left the Citadel shortly after her arrest. Where did he go? It felt like everyone was abandoning her. What about Bray? Did Liara’s agent reach him? How did he take the news? Not like he could come and see her. With the Hegemony placing a target on her back, Earth would not allow a batarian to simply walk into the facility to see the race’s most hated enemy.

A child’s laughter outside caught her attention. Walking over to the open window, feeling Fall’s cool breeze strike her face, she saw a young boy playing with toys depicted of Alliance fighters. He was running around in circles with the toys in his hands making whoosh noises as the toys careened through the air. Watching him so engrossed in his imagination warmed her heart and a small peaked through her thin lips. She longed for those days when she was young and innocent. Course, she had a rough life on Earth, living off the streets, but she never heard of the Reapers and had no idea what was in store for humanity and life beyond the stars in the years to come. Did this boy know? Would his parents tell him the stories that were all over the extranet? Did they even believe them?

Hearing a male clear his throat at the doorway, she glanced over to see James Vega entering, snapping perfectly to attention. “I’m here to escort you to the hearing location, Commander.”

It was time to face the music. Once last look at the child and then Krysta turned to direct her full attention on the marine. “I told you to stop calling me that, James.”

**************

Loud sobbing and medical alerts made it hard for Krysta to clear her mind at Huerta. Ever since Ashley Williams’ admission for severe head trauma, Krysta remained vigil feet away from her
room’s door. That was four hours ago. A surgeon team was called inside about an hour after her arrival and since that time, they hadn’t left. Every now and then, a nurse would go inside and then come out to go to the next patient. Krysta felt like she was too far away from her friend, but the medical staff, regardless of her knowledge to the patient and her credentials would not allow her entrance until they got Ash’s condition stabilized. Why did it come to this? Was it careless of her to let the Illusive Man get the better of her at the Mars Archives? What was he after? She thought he was there to help humanity and yet he saw her as a direct threat. Even when she left the Collector Vessel intact for him to salvage what he could to improve humanity’s defenses. Instead, he kept all the data to himself and would not disclose anything he was working on. It like her against Saren all over again. First, it was Jenkins on Eden Prime and then Kaidan on Virmire. Would Ashley be the first casualty of this war? Who else would be slated for death?

Propping her elbow up on the glass that overlook the Presidium below, Krysta stared down at the small forms of the high-class members that were able to stroll around leisurely through the lush gardens and fountains. “Excuse me. Are you, Commander Shepard?” An asari approached her. “I saw the news vids about you arriving. I’m so glad you are here and- “

“Get lost…” Krysta didn’t look her way as she kept her eyes down. Not the person she wanted to talk to right now.

“I’m sorry?” The statement to the asari left her dumbfounded and she stood there.

“I don’t want to chit chat.” Krysta gruffly shot back. The still struck asari turned away quickly. Once she noticed she was gone, Krysta allowed herself to breathe once more and casted her brown eyes towards Ash’s room. No sign of medical staff yet. What was going on in there? She moved away from the window and towards the room again, debating if she should just go inside to try to get any type of update. She hated to wait. Pausing outside the room, she wrung her hands and then decided upon storming in. Before she could take one step forward, she felt a familiar gentle hand on her arm. She turned to see Liara’s warm bright-eyed face softly smiling at her.

“Any status on Williams?” Liara inquired. Krysta shook her head silently. “They have the best medical staff here. I’m sure they are doing everything they can to save her.” Her soft voice of assurance brought a sense of peace to the situation.

“What if she doesn’t make it?” Krysta asked the question of the hour. What would it do to her? To her crew?

“You shouldn’t think like that.” Liara reminded her. “You can’t do anything for her staying here. I’ll take care over. Go take a break.”

“I don’t need a break.” Krysta darkly argued. She just felt so angry inside. Ash’s injury was a huge blow to her. Just as she was getting out of her hearing, the Reapers attacked the Earth, thousands of innocents died right in front of her, then Ashley was severely injured on Mars. She couldn’t let her guard down for one second. Not now.

“I checked this place out. It’s been awhile since I left for Mars. There’s a new club called Purgatory. Go there and have a drink. I think James is there.” Liara smiled at her warmly.

Krysta glared at her angrily. “I’m not here to celebrate, Liara.” Her friend was in there fighting for her life and here Liara was suggesting she go down and drink.

Liara pulled away and looked at her deeply with concern. “I was only suggesting that you get your mind off things, Shepard.” Krysta could tell the hurt in her voice. Her friend was defending her suggestion.
Taking another glance towards Ashley’s room, Krysta sighed heavily and hung her head. Liara was right. She had to get away from Huerta for a bit. All the commotion was going to drive her mad. “I’ll be back in two hours sharp.” She moved quickly away towards the elevators. She just prayed that if it was Ash’s time to leave, then she would hang on until her return.

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It took her about forty-five minutes to get to her ship, change into casual attire and make it to Purgatory. She felt guilty standing outside the elevator on the ward floor that housed one of the biggest clubs on the Citadel, but she knew she needed the break. The bad part was that the war with the Reapers was only in the first stages. What would it be like for her months down the road? Her feet were firmly planted on the metal floors and her eyes would not move from the club’s entrance. Was this where she really needed to be right now? What about the rest of her crew? She should be prepping for the upcoming war, not dancing or drinking.

Seeing an upset woman in business attire approaching the club like she was on a mission, Krysta decided to follow her to see what the problem was. The approach to the club made the woman feel like she was going out of her way to deal with a problem. She was mumbling heatedly under her breath. Krysta denied the urge to approach her then and there. Purgatory’s pounding beat flooded her ears as she entered, and she lost herself immensely in the lights and sounds. People were laughing amongst one another and drinking while others were dancing. Were they completely oblivious to the real world outside? Or were they in complete denial? For a moment, she lost track of the dark-haired woman and then caught her again turning towards the outer part of the main floor towards a more secluded section.

Keeping her head down slightly to avoid attention, Krysta casually strolled by, taking a quick peek at the conversation the woman was having with her intendent. Doing a double take, she froze solid in place when she saw none other than Aria T’Loak herself sitting there smug with Bray standing beside her. Shaking her head in disbelief, she moved closer. This had to be a dream! Why was Aria on the Citadel? Why was she not on Omega? What all took place while she was in lock-up? Aria and Bray both caught her approach and Aria quickly dismissed the woman in front of her.

Krysta kept her eyes completely on Aria, avoiding Bray’s. She could feel him staring at her. Her heart racing in her chest. Why was she feeling this way? Why couldn’t she look him in the eye?

“Aria…what the hell are you doing here?” Krysta could barely get the words out as she tried her best not to be rattled by the current situation.

“Omega was taken from me by Cerberus. See that they let you out.” Aria coldly spat out. “I’m not surprised. I knew they would.”

Krysta clenched her fists as she finally met Bray’s gaze directly. “I did everything I could to warn the batarians on Aratoht. I didn’t have a choice.” Bray this time diverted his glance away as if he was avoiding the truth.

“I’m sure you didn’t.” Aria commented, trying to keep control of the conversation. “Excellent timing that you showed up. I was going to send a message to your holding cell, but I’m glad you were able to get out earlier. I want to help you, Shepard.”

Aria and Bray both caught her approach and Aria quickly dismissed the woman in front of her.

“Omega was taken from me by Cerberus. See that they let you out.” Aria coldly spat out. “I’m not surprised. I knew they would.”

Krysta turned her eyes back down to the purple Asari sitting in front of her. “No deal, Aria.”

“You haven’t heard my offer. I know the war you are in is important. I’m willing to give you ground troops, mechs, ships, credits. All that I can muster from the merc gangs that have taken refuge on here. I know their contacts on this station and they are loyal to me.” She paused as if she was trying to let Krysta take it in. “In exchange, I want assurance from you that when it’s time to take back Omega from Cerberus, that you will help me. A fair deal. In fact, you are getting the better end.”
Krysta stared right through T’Loak as if the offer insulted her. She tried to be nice and help others, but now was not the time. She had been ruthless before to get the job done and proved it on Torfan. She had to be that way again. If she didn’t, more lives would be at stake, more of her team. If she hadn’t trust the Illusive Man before and severed ties, maybe Ashley would still be with her and not fighting for her survival on some operating table. She knew that Hackett implored her to build Alliances to go up against the Reapers, but that was referring to the Turians, Krogans and the Salarians. The major players in Citadel Space. She needed the Turian military, the bulk of the Krogan boots and the Salarian espionage to get her through. She didn’t need Aria and a few measly merc bands. Most of whom she tore apart on Omega when she rescued Garrus. For once, Aria was in an awkward position and to be simply, she was begging for aid because she didn’t have the resources. She needed help and didn’t want to be direct. For now, Krysta would make her sweat and only accept the deal when it was the right time for her; not on Aria’s terms. A crooked smile went across her lips. She waited to make Aria squirm. “No deal.” She turned and left the club, not looking back. She spent too much time away from Ash. She needed to get back to her.

Bray didn’t like the change in Krysta’s face. He knew she was guarded on Omega, but it was a façade. This time, he could see the pure enjoyment of turning down Aria T’Loak. Omega didn’t mean much to Shepard, he would admit, to the terms of saving her homeworld, Earth, but innocent lives were at stake. Omega’s stronghold only solidified Cerberus’ position and gave them direct access to the technology to maintain the upper hand. Krysta should have seen this. Why would she turn it away? He longed to see her to only see a much darker side of her. Did she change in that short of time away from him? What caused it? Was she still held up about Aratoht?

“That was...unexpected.” Aria tried not to sound disappointed in the rejection, but he knew that she was. She let the statement linger in the air, as if she was expecting him to make the next move.

“I’ll go talk to her.” He moved away from his position to follow Krysta. Now it would be up to him. Hurrying through the opening, he saw Krysta outside the club, waiting for her elevator to take her back to her previous destination. Jogging towards her, he called for her attention. “Commander Shepard, wait up!”

Turning her head to look at him, her eyes transfixed upon him, but it seemed as if she was not really looking right at him. She was looking through him. As if he was not there. The doors to the elevator opened and she remained still to let the previous riders depart first. Growling in frustration, Bray quickened his steps and roughly grabbed her arm before she had a chance to take a step ahead. The sudden action startled those next to her and several others scurried to the elevator to remove themselves from the situation. Grabbing his hand, she maneuvered to where she took hold of his entire forearm and flipped him over her shoulder and onto his back near the rail. The back of his head slammed against the railing. “I’m not making a deal with her, Bray!”

Bray looked up at her in pure shock and disbelief by the sudden attack, his head throbbing from the pain. Was this the same woman he believed to have feelings for on Omega? “You don’t know what’s going on Omega!” He snapped back defensively. “I was there! Innocent people are dying!”

“What about Earth? Have you heard the news? Earth was attacked by the Reapers. So, what if Cerberus is attacking Omega? The Reapers are killing thousands as we speak. My friend Ashley could be dying at this very moment at the hospital and Aria wants me to kiss her ass?!” Krysta growled as she stared down at him. The batarian was tight lipped, but guarded, as if he was expecting another hit from her. His silence made Krysta turn away from her to return to her previous destination.

“I believe you.” He called out to her.
“What?” His response to her was vague.

Gingerly getting up, nursing his throbbing head, Bray kept his eyes on her. “An agent of the Shadow Broker approached me on Omega soon after you turned yourself in. The Broker spoke of your innocence. I believe you, Shepard.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Bray.” This was the first time in a while that she spoke his name out loud without any type of hostility behind it. “The actions I took on Aratoht didn’t stop them. They still hit Khar’ Shaan destroying your entire homeworld. We were not ready.”

“Blame the Alliance.”

“If they didn’t lock me up, the humans and the batarians would be in open war.” Her demeanor softened as she divulged her emotions that were bottled up inside her. She never had a chance to confide in anyone while she was in holding. Now, it seemed she was unleashing everything to him. She begged for inner strength to keep it together so wouldn’t fall apart then and there and cry like an infant. That would be a huge publicity day. Commander Shepard crying to batarian outside club.

Bray’s voice softened more to match hers. “Just hear out Aria. Cerberus is the enemy. They attacked Omega and are using it as a command post. There are innocent lives still on the station. Aria is proud. She wouldn’t come to you unless she really needed it.”

“I know Cerberus is the enemy. The Illusive Man is responsible for what happened to my crewmate.” Krysta’s voice darkened once more as the terrible incident that happened to Ashley at the Archives replayed in her mind. “The Illusive Man was never an ally. He was just using me to get what he wanted, and he got it. I don’t want to be used again.”

“Aria is not using you.” Bray shook his head. “She can be your ally right now.”

“I don’t trust her, Bray. I need allies that I can trust. When I leave here, I’m going to Palaven to gain Turian support. They have a strong military fleet.”

“The Turians were not always allies to the humans.” Bray interjected matter-of-factly. Everyone knew the transgression that happened between the two species during the First Contact War.

She knew he was right but dealing with Aria right now and subjecting to her will was not on her game plan. She had to keep her focus, even if it meant ruining the bond she had with Bray for whatever that was anymore. “I’m sorry, Bray. For now, the answer is still no. I must put humanity first and that means dealing with the Turians, not her.”

He looked at her in disbelief. His eyes wide with disappointment and shock. This was not what he expected at all from their reunion. “Then perhaps Aria was wrong…” His voice lowered. “Omega doesn’t need you.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Krysta Shepard is brokering deals while the Citadel is under attack by Cerberus. Will Aria get her chance for vengeance?

Mass Effect Solace Chapter 21

The gentle hum of the war room brought tranquility to Krysta and she often sought refuge there instead of her cabin. Her eyes skimmed over the latest report on their military assets. An Elcor vessel made it into the fold along with a few rusty Volus merchant ships that the ambassador “could spare.” She wondered if he would change his tune once the Reapers met his homeworld, Irune. Instead of helping the humans, the other council races were holding the bulk of their military and resources to protect their own borders. No one wanted to pledge anything. A selfish move, but she pondered if Earth would be the same if the roles were reversed. How many Alliances vessels would be sent to assist Palaven on day one?

At least with the new Primarch, the Turians were now on board to support their cause. Their alliance came with a cost. They wanted krogan boots on Palaven to aid them. History then repeated itself, the Turians wanted the Krogan to help them. The Krogan ambassador was on his way to broker a treaty. Krysta suspected that their aid would come with a hefty price as well. The Krogan were not kind to many races and who could blame them? After they assisted in the Rachni attacks, the Krogan were presented with the genophage. They were considered hostile among the Turians and the Salarlans. At least now after Menae, Garrus was on the Normandy. She missed him. A new familiar face. The Salarlans were also coming to broker a truce and she hoped that the terms of the treaty would not be as exhausting as Menae. “The Krogan ambassador is coming onboard, Shepard.” Liara’s soft voice called to her as the asari scientist entered the room.

“Good.” Krysta’s eyes never left the chart in front of her. “It’s not enough.”

“What?”

“We are slowly receiving help for the Crucible to go up against the Reapers. It’s not enough to stop them.”

“We still have a strong chance, Shepard. We are too early in this game to know the outcome.” Liara pulled up her omni tool. “My agents advised that they received several offers to the Shadow Broker from freelance mercenaries who are willing to help.”

“Aria wanted to help too.” Krysta admitted.

“That’s…peculiar.” Liara chose her words carefully. She too was leery about the notorious pirate queen’s true motive in any deal that she tried to broker. “What did you tell her?”

“No.” Krysta closed the chart. “I don’t trust her. I’m not working for her.”

Liara wrung her hands as she contemplated the idea. “It’s better than working for the Illusive Man.”
The man’s name poured off her lips like acid. Krysta could tell that she despised the head of Cerberus just the same if not more than she did. “Mercs loyal to her, who are organized, could be very useful.”

“Maybe.” Krysta dodged to discuss the topic further. She avoided the Citadel since her last departure. Ash was released from intensive care and was transported to a rehab facility inside the Huerta. She would be in the same therapy class as Thane Krios. She knew that she would be in good hands. Thane gave his assurance that Ash would be cared for while she was away. In fact, Ash’s last communication to her was that Councilor Udina offered her the rank of Spectre. The honor was a prestigious one and Krysta debated if the move was more political than really for Ashley’s credentials. Was it a blow to Krysta? She knew that he and her didn’t get along. Even more so when she backed Anderson to be the first council member over him.

“You trust him.” Liara continued the discussion.

“Who?” Krysta tried to act innocent. She knew where her friend was getting to.

“Bray. Aria’s bodyguard.” Liara pressed further. “Does he bother you that much? I’ve never seen you act like this before.”

“Look, Liara.” Krysta felt herself become more guarded. She didn’t know where her feelings were for him and she didn’t want to openly discuss the matter with her when she herself had no idea what to feel. Avoiding the Citadel was the safest thing to do at the current moment. Her tone became icy. “One way or another, I would still be helping Aria. She wants something. I’ll deal with it after I get the Salarians and Krogan on board. Earth is burning. Millions are counting on me and my affairs come last.” She paused and stiffened her posture. She opened her mouth to further defend her choice but stopped herself when she heard a commotion outside the war room. It sounded like one of her officers was arguing with someone. “What the hell?” She moved quickly to the door to only come face to face with Urdnot Wrex.

The young Alliance officer was behind Wrex and quickly snapped to attention when he saw Krysta standing there. His face turning red from embarrassment. “Sorry, mam. He would not wait in the conference room as you instructed.”

“I’m sure he couldn’t.” Krysta flashed a smile to the krogan in front of her. “Causing problems as always, Wrex?”

“What?” He smiled innocently at her. “I told them I was here to see you and they said you were here.” He then turned his large head to look at Liara with a chuckle. “See you still look the same, Liara.”

“A pleasure as always, Wrex.” She returned the greeting.

“Dismissed, Lieutenant. Thank you.” She waved the still flustered officer away before returning her focus on the reptilian alien. “Glad you could make it and I’m glad I am dealing with you. May make things easier.”

“We’ll see.” Wrex’s voice became serious. “I’m glad you didn’t shoot me on Virmire, Shepard.”

“Be a pain in the ass now and I can try again.”

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“Scan is clear. You are free to pass.” The C-Sec officer ushered Bray inside the holding bay of the Citadel. The area was not meant for that many refugees to be housed. At first, each of the races were segregated with their own kind, but then space began to run out and many were seen housed
together; sharing what supplies they could have between them. All the food and medical supplies were rationed. Clearance to the upper levels of the station was not permitted except to only a select few. Luckily for him, he was one of the select few. His overall appearance made him stand out amongst the inhabitants. His face was clean, his eyes were not sunken in from lack of sleep nor did he have any injuries to speak of currently. Keeping eyes straight ahead, he avoided the looks of his fellow batarians that were in the smaller of the areas of the bay. He could hear them chattering among one another, whispering about his presence. Who cares what they thought? He traveled down there on official business for Aria, well sort of. The subject matter still held his personal interest.

His contact, Sayn, caught his eyes from where he sat in the next section over and quickly stood up. The Salarian remained guarded and a few others stepped out of their housing crates with their hidden pistols at the ready. Sayn said nothing to them and held his hand to signal for them to wait. “Hello, Bray. Did Aria set her free?”

“Not yet.” So far, the Eclipse Second-In-Command already answered his first unanswered question. If Jona Sederis was still in a cell on the Citadel, then Krysta didn’t fulfill Aria’s request. The pirate queen sent a private message to the Spectre’s terminal with directions on how fulfill her deal of the bargain, but either the message didn’t reach her yet or she ignored it. Bray suspected it was the latter of the two. He swore to himself. “We are waiting for the authorization to come in.” He gave a sideway glance to the holding bay outside where they were at. A few locals were spying on them. He had to make this quick. “Did Commander Shepard pass through here recently?”

Sayn scratched his head as he pondered over the question. “I only seen her a few times. Most recently when more Turians poured in. One was her associate. I haven’t seen him recently yet either. Maybe a few months ago?”

“Shit.” Bray swore again. The news meant that Krysta did not bother returning to the station since roughly their last encounter. It would have been placed around the same time. Aria wasn’t going to sit around too much longer and let Cerberus hold onto Omega. Her fleet was almost built up. A pack of krogan mercs were on their way with a very important guest of honor.

“When will Jona be released? We were instructed not to do anything until she comes back.” Sayn inquired, breaking Bray of his thoughts. “My men are becoming restless down here.”

Bray didn’t bother on answering him and quickly moved towards the C-Sec guard station that filtered the refugees and visitors from the station. Pushing his way through the crowd, he finally made it back and cut around the growing line of those waiting to be processed. A young female human officer stopped him and prompted him to stand still for the scan. Bray held his breath, fearing that he would not be granted permission to leave. A few seconds later, a chime indicated he was free to pass. Without looking back, he quickly moved down the empty hallway towards the elevator. He was finally safe.

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The brightly neon lit Purgatory sign was a welcoming sight as he approached the club from the elevator. He paused just outside to reach into his pocket and take out a cigarette. He needed a smoke. As he looked around at the scenery and the clubgoers, he realized that the Citadel was way too bright and clean for his liking. Omega was dark and dirty. Most would consider the asteroid station to be a cesspool of drugs, alcohol and sex. He spent about a quarter of his lifespan so far on said station and it always felt like home to him. He longed to be there just like Aria did, but would she have enough to go up against Cerberus? The ground war was only beginning to get tough then. He wondered how Sh’sk and the others were faring? Were they still alive? Were they captured? There were tons of contingencies in place, but would this General Patrovesky anticipate them? What about the adjutants? Were they disposed of or were more citizens being turned to them? Where did they come
from? Why was Cerberus involved? A lot of questions went unanswered before he left the station.

“Hey! I know you.” A male Batarian approached Bray from out of nowhere. Bray glanced around. Where did he come from? It was odd to see any of his kind just walking around the wards.

Bray cocked his head slightly. “I don’t know you.” Bray took another puff of his cigarette. He lied. He recognized him to be Senk Kod’rah. They were enlisted together and served for a few months in basic training. Senk was transferred to another division and left planet side. They lost contact shortly after that. Perhaps, news never reached him that Bray deserted the Hegemony after a few years.

“It’s good seeing you again. There’s only a few of us left. I barely made it. I was on a transport ship back to the homeworld when it was under attack. We diverted to the relay just when the evacuation order was given. You a plant too?” The other lowered his voice. “Never heard from you after my transfer. Glad to see you made it. Were you stationed there when the fallout occurred?”

Bray shifted his stance as he snubbed out his cigarette with his boot. “No. I wasn’t there.” Was this guy playing him or was he that isolated at his post?

“Walk with me.” Senk motioned him along away from prying eyes.

“I have business inside.” Bray didn’t budge.

Senk looked at him in confusion. “Are you not part of the mission too, Bray? I guess they have you doing something else.”

Feeling uneasy about the whole conversation and where it was going, Bray walked towards him trying to look casual. “It can wait. Fill me in.”

“I accessed the port’s codes. It was hard to crack their firewalls, but I was able to grab them until the security sweep.” Senk explained as he opened his omni tool.

“For what?” Bray inquired as he tried to scan over the data that was displayed upon the tool, but it was hard to understand the coding that was popping up.

Senk paused and tapped his ear comm; a call was coming in. Bray couldn’t hear who was talking to him on the other side. “Shit. I’ll disappear. They won’t find me.” He quickly closed his tool.

“What is going on?” Bray pressed.

“I have a tail. I’ll lose her. I’ll catch up.” Senk quickly moved towards the elevator.

Bray let his chest expand as he finally released the breath he felt like he was holding too long. That was too close of a call. Luckily for him, his name wasn’t flashed to wherever Senk was at. Most of hot items were held on Khar’ Shaan unless they figured the trespasser would be near one of their outposts. If Senk discovered that Bray was flagged as a deserter, he would have shot him without giving time for a defense. Seconds later, a huge explosion in the distance rocked the ward. The metal floor beneath him violently shook causing him to lose his footing and crash onto the ground like everyone else. The explosion was followed by several other smaller ones. Clubgoers screamed and ran inside the club in a panic while those inside were running towards the exit to see what was going on.

Standing back up, Bray jolted inside. He pulled up his omni tool and used his program to tap into C-Sec communications. Commander Bailey was already on and directing orders to his teams. “This is not a drill. We are under attack. Dock security flagged multiple inbound vessels as Cerberus. Multiple explosions prior to their landing. We have agents already here. Prepare for casualties. Take
care of the threat and deal with the wounded later.”

Another officer came on the line. “What section are they in?!”

“The heaviest numbers are in- ‘The line went to static.

“Fuck. They got the comms.” Bray shut his tool in frustration as he shoved his way through the sea of people to get to Aria. She was standing up from her couch, watching the events unfold with interest. Her face with some alarm. Her eyes fell upon him and she remained still as he approached. “Cerberus. They are here.”

Aria narrowed her eyes. “Good. What’s C-Sec doing?”

“Dunno. Comms went down. Don’t know how many of them there are.”

Suddenly, shrills of fear filled the air and a group of armed Cerberus soldiers busted inside the club with their rifles pointed at the panicked patrons inside. Many scrambled to hide behind tables, crying and hugging one another. Aria remained calm from where she stood. The soldiers didn’t budge and kept their rifles poised to prevent anyone daring to exit the club. Bray growled as he moved to unholster his pistol, but Aria slapped his hand away, shaking her finger at him slowly. He held her gaze and wondered what she was going to do. The Cerberus soldiers’ radios crackled to life. “Normandy inbound! I repeat Normandy inbound! Be ready!”

The head of the group looked towards the others and pointed to two of the soldiers. “You two, go barricade the elevator!”

Bray whispered to Aria as he took her side while the soldiers were distracted. “Shepard’s here.” A wave of peace came over him. Now the odds would be in their favor. There was no way that C-Sec had the manpower or the skills to square up with a Cerberus force, but with Shepard and her team here, then the tide would be quickly turned.

Aria remained indifferent from the news. Her body became engulfed with a purple hue as she gathered dark energy. By the time, the Cerberus soldiers took note, it was too late. She unleashed a singularity attack that lifted the three remaining soldiers up in the ground. Their feet dangling and kicking as they tried to get back to solid ground. Bray took out his pistol and carefully aimed at each one. Striking a killing blow to their heads. The biotic charge dissipated, and their dead bodies slumped down on the ground. Gasps could be heard from the cowering patrons inside as they saw the display. They peeked out of their hiding spots and stared at Aria and Bray with questioning looks. Many knew who Aria T’Loak was and many still remained fearful for their lives. “Listen up!” Aria’s voice boomed. “I have regained control of this club. Cerberus is out there, and we need to make sure they do not come here. I need all of you to make that possible. Is that clear?”

Bray chewed his lip as he looked back towards Purgatory’s entranceway. Krysta was out there somewhere going up against them while he was here. He went up against them on Omega and knew what the fight was like. He had no idea if the numbers on the Citadel were the same if not more than what he had to endure. He couldn’t let himself just stay there and remain a guard. He looked back over at Aria, who seemed pleased with herself as many began to carry out her order by collecting chairs and tables to act as barricades. He had to act fast. Before saying a word, he made a dash down to the doors, stepping around those carrying the furniture pieces. “Bray! Come back!” He heard Aria’s command but shut his eyes as he ignored it. There was no turning back now. He had to get to Krysta, even if she would refuse the help. Pumping his legs faster, he ran towards the elevator and caught the attention of the two Cerberus soldiers. Taking out his pistol, he nailed one in the head.
before he had a chance to defend himself. The men were caught off guard, not anticipating anyone to come out of the club. The other went to his gun too quickly, so Bray lowered his weapon and shot him in the right knee with cryo rounds. The impact began to freeze the lower extremity, which distracted the Cerberus agent. This gave Bray enough time to fire off another round, hitting him fatally in the head as well.

Leaping over their bodies into the elevator, he punched the controls to take him up to a higher level. He had no idea where Krysta landed, but most likely, it had to be towards the center of the station and that meant the Presidium and C-Sec. If Cerberus wanted to control the station, they would attack there first. He switched out his clip to incendiary ammo instead since he only had two cryo rounds left and didn’t want to worry about changing them during the heat of the battle. He cursed himself for not having time to get his rifle from Aria’s private room inside the club. He had to make each shot count since he was going up against assault rifles with one pistol and he wasn’t biotic, so he had nothing else to fall back on. Seconds later, the elevator doors opened and the display before him was gut wrenching. Many citizens were dead before him in pools of blood. Their wide eyes frozen as they didn’t have time to scream before death overcame them from their bullet wounds. A man to his left had his intestines showing as whatever struck him blew his whole abdomen open. Still the horror was nothing like on Omega. Up ahead, he could hear Cerberus agents talking to one another and the distant sound of gunfire exchange. He scrambled to take cover as the voices drew nearer. He had no idea what he was going up against, but hopefully, the bulk of their strength had moved on since they slaughtered everyone that came across them armed or not. He double checked his clip and closed his eyes to take a breath. “Here we go.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Bray encounters Cerberus opposition on the Citadel. Will he be able to handle them? Is Aria done with waiting? What does she have in store for them?

Mass Effect Solace
Chapter 22

“Orion squadron! We are nearing your position. We lost three. What’s your status?”

Bray dug in his heels and leaped behind a large flower garden box when he heard the Cerberus soldier up ahead. He gritted his teeth and waited for gun fire to head in his direction, but instead he was met with silence. Seconds later, the agent’s radio crackled to life. “We have large opposition by C-Sec! No sign of Shepard!”

“Negative here too. We are inbound. Phase two is implemented.”

“Roger that.”

Bray held his head back against the structure’s wall as he listened in. His finger anxiously resting on the trigger of his pistol. Beads of sweat dripped off his face. He had to scramble up five wards towards his present location. His quads and calves were on fire and he struggled to catch his breath. He was out of shape since leaving the Batarian military. At least, he didn’t have a lot of climbing on Omega like he did here. The sound of boots echoing that was fading away gave him the indication that the two Cerberus soldiers that he pegged were moving away from him. With their backs turned, he had to take this chance. Standing up quickly, he fired and struck the one on the left squarely in the back. The soldier stumbled but his kinetic shield took the bulk of the impact. Bray quickly opened fired again, not giving his opponent time to counter fire. The multiple rounds knocked out the shields and shattered the armor. His squadmate squared up against Bray and fired. Bray rolled behind a merchant’s shop counter. He closed his eyes as he heard the gunfire moving in the same direction, taking out the shop’s two terminals. Glass shattered all around as the terminal screens were destroyed. Pieces of the terminal flew like projectiles and struck several items across from where he was at. “Fuck…” His jaw dropped. There was a slight pause and Bray could hear the soldier discharge his magazine. Raising up, he opened fire, relentlessly squeezing the trigger, shredding the soldier’s shields and blasting the torso of his armor. The Cerberus agent grunted painfully as his vital organs were being struck till he collapsed; the rest of his armor stained with blood. He didn’t allow himself to catch a breath as he looked towards the first of his foes that he struck. The Cerberus soldier was rasping through his respirator as he stumbled towards Bray, determined to take him down with him. He raised his Hornet pistol and aimed. Bray dove to avoid, but felt his shields taking a part of the impact. As he crashed onto his back, he raised his own weapon and opened fire, catching the Cerberus agent in the arms. The agent howled in pain as his hand dropped his weapon. “For Cerberus!” He wailed as he recklessly began to charge at Bray, ignoring his wounds. Bray cockily lifted his right arm and pointed his pistol at his foe. He squeezed the trigger, but no shots were fired. Looking down, he realized he unloaded all of his clip! He was empty! Before he could look up, the Cerberus agent pounced on him, tumbling them both to the ground. A serrated knife was exposed by
the soldier and Bray grasped his arms to prevent him to get any closer. Shifting his body, he managed to work both his feet between them and lifted his opponent over his head, slamming the man’s back against the vendor counter. Bray didn’t give much time once contact was made before he rushed at him again, knocking the blade out of his hand, then delivered a hard punch right in the soldier’s helmet. He was also met with a swift upper cut, striking his jaw and knocking him back. Seeing his fallen comrade’s weapon, the Cerberus soldier moved to take the advantage, but Bray grabbed his waist, knocking him off course and slamming him hard to the ground. Elbowing him sharply in the back, Bray turned and picked up the hornet pistol and opened fire. At point blank range, the Cerberus’ shields and armor didn’t stand a chance and the bullets shattered the helmet, striking his skull. His body went limp.

Panting for breath, Bray stood back up and felt his whole body shaking from the adrenaline rush. He felt his lip stinging from the earlier blow and wiped the blood coming down his face off with the back of his hand. Keeping the hornet, he looked around to see where to go next. That’s when he barely heard the chattering of someone or something nearby. Just as he turned to see what was coming, he saw a flash of a sword. He didn’t have time to fully evade the attack and his upper right shoulder got part of it. The sword’s razor tip edge, sliced through his armor, tearing his clothes underneath and his flesh. “What the hell?!” He grasped his arm as he tried to move out of the way to avoid any further damage. A slim humanistic being stared at him emotionlessly, clothed in a white Cerberus uniform. It was an agent of the pro human organization like he had never seen before. “What the fuck are you?” He asked, but the creature said nothing and just stared at him coldly. Was it alive?

Seconds later, the being charged at him again with its sword at the ready. Bray opened fire. The phantom hopped to the right then seemed to almost glide on its feet as it moved back to its course. In a panic, Bray held the trigger down and unleashed a barrage of rounds. Just as he thought that the phantom would be struck, it just vanished. Keeping his guard up, he scanned his surroundings, but there was no sign of it. He could hear its eerie chattering in the air, but it was hard to pinpoint where it was. Looking around, he made sure that he wasn’t exposing himself to any potential ambushes by other Cerberus soldiers. This thing could be just distracting him. He could see movement ahead and it sounded like more gunfire. He deviated his attention from his would-be attacker to the skirmish ahead. More people were coming into view. A familiar blonde female was firing back at Cerberus forces with her assault rifle. Bray smiled widely. “Shepard…”

Just as he saw her, he heard the familiar sound of the phantom’s cloaking and then a sharp pain hit the left of his upper back. The phantom took advantage of the situation and hit him again. This time, a large laceration was to the left of his back. He cried out from the pain and fell to the ground. He desperately raised his right hand to fire off rounds at the phantom, but it was hard to see. Was this thing toying with him? Picking him off slowly for fun? The creature cloaked again, and Bray clenched his teeth as he hissed through the pain, making himself stand back up, ignoring the levels of agony coursing through his body. The phantom uncloak twenty feet ahead of him and stared at him once more. He could also see the reflection of his face on the shiny metal of its katana. Then just as it was about to lunge at him, gunfire ripped through its body and it violently spun to the ground. Its deadly sword clanging to the ground. Letting out a sigh of exasperation, Bray moved up on one knee as he saw the welcoming sight of his rescuer. Krysta Shepard approached with an asari and a male human behind her. Her familiar almond eyes looking down at him with concern. “You alright, Bray?”

“Nothing I can’t live with.” Bray took uneasy glances at her squadmates. He could feel their judging eyes on him. “Thanks for saving my ass.” He returned his attention back to her. “Any idea what they want?”

“These fuckers are going after the Council. I can’t believe they are killing innocent people! I thought
Cerberus was on our side!” The man beside Krysta griped as pure emotion consumed his face. He was itching for payback.

“They were never on our side, James.” Krysta corrected him sharply.

“How does it look in this area?” Liara asked Bray. She seemed the most interested in his presence and he noticed she was glancing at him and then at Krysta. Did she know details about the two of them? Not like they were an item, but her unspoken hints made him wonder.

Bray guarded his left upper side as he could feel his back throbbing. Before he had a chance to move, he noticed the asari moving towards his back. “I cleared out what I could. I don’t know what the hell that thing was that I just fought.”


“The laceration on his back will need stitches. I can give some medigel for the pain.”

Bray swatted her away, feeling somewhat embarrassed that he was being cared for in front of Krysta. “I’m fine. I can handle it later.”

“Where’s Aria?” Krysta lifted an eyebrow at him.

“At Purgatory.”

Krysta studied him momentarily and then motioned for her team to move ahead. “We’ve wasted too much time here. Let’s move before they get to the council.” She paused after James and Liara ran ahead. Her eyes fell upon Bray again. Her lips seem to almost tremble, as if she was itching to say something. “There may be more on the station.”

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled.” Bray grunted softly as he applied the gel to his shoulder wound. He could feel a numbing sensation course through his upper extremity once the medication was applied. “You better not let those bastards take you.” His voice softened as his chestnut brown eyes met hers.

He could almost see a flicker of a smirk on her face. “I saved your ass just now, Batarian.”

After he saw her depart on the elevator towards the upper levels, Bray winced as he walked slowly towards the club. It was hard for him to reach the injury on his back without help and he didn’t want to mess with it until he was in the clear at the club. He had to be on guard. Krysta did have a point. There could be more outer pockets of Cerberus fighters on the ward. He tensed up when he heard voices ahead and the sound of combat boots hitting the metal floors from running. Checking his clip, he noticed he had about half capacity left so he prayed that he didn’t have too much opposition. To his surprise, the approaching group were not Cerberus, but C-Sec, led by Commander Bailey. The leading officer held up his fist to signal his men to stop when he saw Bray come into view. “You okay?” His voice filled with genuine concern as he looked upon Bray’s injuries.

“Yes. Shepard went towards the elevator.”

Bailey tilted his head a bit, puzzled by the statement. He looked at Bray questioningly as if he wondered how Bray knew her. “Thank you. I can’t send medics yet. Can you make it to Huerta?”

“Yeah,” Bray lied. He had no intention to wait in line at Huerta for aid. There were no real hospitals on Omega, so he was used to just being patched up at Afterlife. He debated if he should stick around to meet up with Shepard and her team once they came back down but decided against it. He still had...
a job to do. Turning towards Purgatory’s direction, he jogged back to check in on things.

A pink hue tone female Salarian greeted Krysta at Huerta’s check-in counter that afternoon when she arrived after the battle. “Greetings…” She paused as she waited for the terminal to display the facial scan data. “Ah, yes, Commander Shepard. I’m commencing triage due to short staffing. I can begin the intake process.”

Krysta looked at her in annoyance as she blinked from the acknowledgment. “You didn’t recognize me without the scan?” The identification statement seemed to almost insult her. She saved the station numerous times now and this Salarian didn’t know who she was until a computer told her.

The Salarian medical aid looked at her in confusion. “My apologies, Commander. I arrived from Surkesh two days ago and – “

“I saved your asses on Surkesh” Krysta hissed. She was exhausted physically and mentally. The war’s intensity was picking up and she not only had to deal with the Reapers, but she had to deal with Cerberus. It was hard to play out two battles at one time. Cerberus’ interference was becoming trivial. She held her head and groaned, almost forgetting why she was there. Following the fight with Cerberus and Udina, she received notice from Commander Bailey that he sent Bray to Huerta to be checked out for his injuries. She wanted to stop by and thank him, in private. “I’m not here for treatment. I’m here to check in on a patient. He should have been here a few hours ago.”

Stunned by Shepard’s earlier confrontational tone, there was a slight lag before the medic staff returned to her terminal. “Uh, right, mam. Sure. What’s his name?”

“It’s a Batarian. First name is Bray.”

The salarian typed at the controls and then shook her head. “No matches found, Commander. Are you sure he is here yet? I have been manning this desk for the past four hours. I don’t recall many batarians passing by here.” She gave a light-hearted chuckle. “I don’t expect their kind to really come here.”

Krysta scowled by the Salarian’s private joke. However, she was right. Most Batarians kept to themselves and would treat one another versus relying on any other race. It wasn’t uncommon. The Krogan were the same way. Two of the most stubborn races. “Are you sure?” She pressed further. “Commander Bailey sent him up here.”

“Trust me, Commander. If a Batarian passed through here, I would have remembered.” She flashed a smile.

Defeated, Krysta turned away from the counter without thanking her and glanced out the large windows that outlined the hallway of Huerta that connected from the hospital’s entrance to the rooms. Smoke was still smoldering in the distance and skycars were zipping along as if nothing really happened that day. She knew that further in the hospital, Thane Krios was in there. He was being treated for the stab wound he received from Kai Leng. She knew it was a fatal blow. A part of her didn’t want to go back and hear the expected news. The Drell was a tough ally and became a good friend to her. His pledge to help her on the suicide run without charge was shocking and proved his honor. She just didn’t want another close casualty to this war. Mordin died on Tuchanka but managed to cure the genophage. Were all her friends going to be picked off one by one? Closing her eyes tightly and taking a deep breath, she re-opened them and looked towards the door that led to the ICU. She had to go tell Thane goodbye.

Bray’s appearance troubled many still seeking shelter at the club, even though the station’s all-clear
sign was given. They scurried out of his way or changed course to avoid any contact near him. His armor was damaged with blood staining the area of his shoulder and back. The blood that traveled down his face dried. He felt his head spinning from the blood loss. He was losing blood from the open wound and his back felt like it was on fire from the pain. Aria was still standing at her private section when she saw him walking in. Her purple face hid any lack of concern and only disappointment filled her. When he was close enough, she finally spoke, “Did you save the day?”

“Did what I could.” Bray gritted through his teeth as he finally allowed himself to sit down on the couch.

Aria snapped her fingers to her Asari attendant nearby to grab her attention. “Patch him up.”

The asari moved over to him quickly with an already prepared medical kit and got to work first at his back. She allowed him to remove his armor. Bray looked up at Aria in bewilderment as he sat there in his underarmor garments. She answered his unspoken question. “I know you’re itching to get back at Cerberus.” Sarcasm rolled off her tongue.

He avoided the obvious and winced as he felt the Asari sewing up the gash behind him. “I was getting bored.”

“Good. I’m tired of waiting.” She turned away from where she was standing and moved towards the opposite end of the couch. “Once Diyxa is done with you, check on the fleets, then see Hertak down on Zeta Ward.”

“Oh?” He recalled the Krogan’s name as one from the groups that went to fetch a particular person of interest: Captain Lence of Cerberus. Aria’s people tracked a lone cruiser and she sent out her best men, which pertained to mostly krogan, to retrieve the vessel for her upcoming plans to retake Omega.

“Yes. I think the Captain has awaken from his…injuries and is ready to talk. I’ll be down there shortly.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Aria resorts to brutality to take back Omega. Krysta Shepard confides in Ashley who tries to pair her up with James Vega.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 23

Her finger traced around the rim of her shot glass and Krysta debated if she wanted to exert the energy to rise from her chair and move over to the Normandy’s self-service bar to make her another few or not. The table already housed three empty glasses. Her body felt warm from the alcohol settling in and the light buzz filled her head. She made it a point to go down to the lounge in the later hours of the night, when most were asleep. Lately, she found it hard to get any type of rest and she didn’t know for sure when she closed her eyes if she really was asleep or not. Urgent calls came in through the ship’s comm at all hours of the day. The war on Earth would not pause and the Reapers didn’t rest. They were machines. Cerberus’ attack on the Citadel was unexpected and a complete game changer. Hundreds of innocent lives were taken, and good C-Sec officers were killed in the line of duty. Just when refugees felt like they found a safe haven, they were torn apart again with violence.

“See that you’re down here too, Skipper.” Ashley broke up her thoughts as the dark-haired woman entered the lounge. She was dressed down in a pair of black workout pants and a white tank that insinuated the curves of her body.

“Ash…” Krysta smiled at her entry. They didn’t get to speak much after what transpired on the Citadel. She never thought she would be pitted against the new Spectre, but Udina’s treachery did just that. Luckily, Ash never lost faith in her and turned the tables on the traitorous Council member. Shepard couldn’t believe that even how much of a snake Udina was, she never believed him to be low enough to side with the Illusive Man. Were they truly losing the war that bad? Udina was so determined to carry out his orders. Was he brainwashed? No, he was his own person. She was justified in his death. Then again, Amanda Kenson did a complete three sixty on her and she sided with the Reapers. “Can’t sleep either, huh?”

Ashley Williams moved around the counter to grab the liquor bottles she wanted to make her a drink. “How can I?” The woman sighed heavily and set the bottle in her hand down hard on the counter. Her brown eyes casted over at Krysta with pain. “I still can’t believe that I almost shot you. Skipper, that’s not like me. What are we doing?”

“But you didn’t.” Krysta pointed out with a grim smile. “I could have shot you too and you know I would have been on point.”

This aroused a chuckle from her old teammate. “You calling me a bad shot, Shepard?” She eyed the empty glasses in front of her old XO. “You going for a record?”

Krysta shook her head as she set aside her glass. “If I did, there would be empty bottles instead. I
needed to get my mind off things.”

“I bet. Alcohol is the way to do it.” Williams continued to fix her drink. “James said he could fix me just one that would do the trick.” A grin. “I don’t trust him.”

“James is not a bad man. Just a little thick headed sometimes. I thought I was going to have to kick him off the ship when we were leaving to Mars. He didn’t want to leave Earth and challenged my order.” Krysta’s face became more serious. “You know I don’t like that.”

“Trust me. I know.” Ashley kicked back her drink and paused briefly to allow the alcohol to hit her system. “Saw it on Virmire with Wrex. Glad he backed down, but damn.” She giggled. “Squaring up with a Krogan like that. That took guts.” She paused as if she was thinking something and then grinned bigger at her commander. “You and James hitting it off pretty good?”

Krysta understood the implication and shook her head quickly. “Not that way. James is not my type.” Her mind switched to Bray on the Citadel and her recent exchange with him. She hated to admit it, but she feared for his safety now even more on the station. She never really thought about it too much. She was lucky to be in the same system when the attack took place. Fortunately for her, the Illusive Man was not planning on her returning any time soon. After leaving Huerta, she knew that the most likely, that Bray returned to Purgatory and back to Aria. She still couldn’t figure out why he even left the club. Aria never did anything unless it was in her interests. With limited staff, she wouldn’t allow him to leave her side for too long. Was he there fighting on his own terms? Speaking with him at the club was out of the question. Aria would be there, and she wasn’t ready to deal with her request just yet. Something else was more pressing…a place she never thought would be placed back into her life again: Eden Prime. Another factor towards her drinking that night. Eden Prime was the first mission she and Kaidan were on together. He accompanied her along with Jenkins to investigate the Geth attack on the colony. Nihlus, the Turian Spectre, was there to observe her for her own Spectre candidacy. He was dropped off at drop point one. She and the others were dispatched to drop point two. Kaidan was a powerful biotic and he had her back the entire way. He messed up by getting too close to the beacon, which created a rift between the two. Looking back showed that if he didn’t, then she would have never seen the vision that helped her go up against Saren and Sovereign.

Ashley took the seat next to her and gently reached out to grab her hand. Her dark eyes looking right at her. “You need to let Kaidan go, Skip. He would have wanted you to be happy. I’ve seen the way that James looks at you.” A warm smile hinted at on her red lips.

“And you.” Krysta countered as she retracted her hand. “James just thinks I’m his type because I can beat his ass in sparring.”

“Yeah, he told me that you bloodied his nose.” Ashley giggled as she relaxed against her chair back. “I would have paid to see that.” A beat.” So, no one special right now in your life?” She wouldn’t let the subject go it seemed.

“I don’t have time for that.” Krysta pushed herself away from the table and stood up, steadying herself first before attempting to work. Her head spun. “Relationships can cloud your judgment. Especially when they are fighting beside you. I have always known that.” She looked down at the floor as she felt her fists clenching up. “That’s why I told Kaidan to ready the nuke. I knew that Virmire was going to be a tough fight. The entire galaxy was counting on me.” Her confession made Ashley speechless. No one really knew why she made the choice that she did. Krysta never wrote about it in her report nor explained in her debriefing.
“Thanks, Commander.” Ashley turned to face her. “All these years I thought it was because he was better than me. I wanted to prove myself and I thought you doubted me.”

Williams’ serious tone made Krysta smile as she locked eyes on her once more. “I never questioned what you are capable of Williams.”

“Hah, I’m glad you don’t. Not everyone in the Alliance felt that way. Especially after what my grandfather did.”

“You have to let that go. Fuck them. You never have to prove yourself to anyone. You have excellent marksmanship. I’m glad to have you back on my side…” Krysta grinned playfully at her. “Fellow Spectre.”

Ashley rose up and gave a salute to her. “Mam.”

The bloodied blonde hair man was held by barrier cuffs on a large metal table inside one of Purgatory’s private rooms. The room itself was guarded at the entry by two Krogan mercenaries, and three more were inside the room. Captain Lence was a distinguished Cerberus high-ranking officer. He had served with the organization for over ten years and was tasked recently for surveillance in the Caleston Rift. There were several mining operations in that system and that meant resources. Some human based companies pledged their loyalty to Cerberus. The Illusive Man’s current work required a lot of resources and funding. That meant increasing whatever kind of revenue they could muster. Financial backers were not enough. The project that their leader was engrossed with was massive and a huge undertaking. Only a few knew the details and Lence was not one of them. Whatever it was, he knew that it was for the greater good and humanity’s survival. With the war going on with the Reapers, Lence was confident that they would have an easy voyage for his task. He was wrong. They were boarded by a gang of Krogan mercenaries and his men didn’t have a chance. His entire crew was slain, and he was taking captive. His destination was unknown. His eyes were covered with a makeshift blinder until he was placed in his room. He fought to keep consciousness after the cruelties that were administered to him. His left ankle and right knee patella were shattered by a Krogan warhammer. Several three-inch lacerations were on his right arm from a serrated blade. The cuts were done slowly to enhance the pain. His captors wanted information. Information regarding secret codes that would gain them access inside Omega’s barricade. He was not part of the fleets’ assault on Omega. That was led by General Patrovesky. However, they all had their own codes when they were identifying themselves. Each had a unique one and not a universal. A Cerberus failsafe. Throughout his career, it was burnt into his mind to never give into any type of torture. Cerberus had vigorous training regarding mock torture and often inflicted pain on their men intentionally to know what it would feel like and how to endure.

The door to his darkened room slid open and he could hear heels approaching, accompanied by military grade boots. He stared up at the ceiling and took a breath to embrace whatever would happen to him next. “Stand him up.” A stern female voice was heard. Seconds later, he felt the rough reptilian Krogan hands jerk him off the table and hold onto his arms. His wrists were firmly cuffed with electrobands. The muscles in his legs felt like rubber after lying on his back for several days so he struggled to just find his footing. He screamed in agony as the weight pressed down on his fractures. His fumbling was annoyance to the pair of Krogan that were holding him. He was met with several grunts of displeasure as they roughly jerked at his arms to make him standstill. His legs buckling from the excruciating pain. The interior lights slowly came on and the silhouette of an Asari standing before him was uncovered. He heard of the news about Omega’s coup. Aria escaped and now found herself at wherever he was. Beside her was a Batarian, heavily armed with an assault rifle. Purple dots outlined his face.
“Enjoying your accommodation, Captain? I hope that you are.” Aria glared at him with daggers in her eyes. To her, he represented Cerberus and she would have no qualms about killing him in cold blood.

“I’ll never tell you what you want, Aria.” He spat at her. “Torturing me will get you nowhere.” He smirked knowingly. “You will never get Omega back.” He was proud to know if he should die here and there, then he would be praised as one of Cerberus’ highest assets. He refused Aria T’Loak and maintained their stronghold on Omega to serve mankind. His family would be proud of him.

This statement unmoved Aria and her bodyguard. “You are correct. Torture seems to be ineffective against someone so strong will as you.” The last part of her statement didn’t seem to be flattering. In fact, there was almost a darker meaning to it. What was she getting at? She stopped and looked over at her Batarian accomplice. “Bray.”

The Batarian stepped forward and opened his omni tool. A holo image of a young woman holding a toddler boy came up. “We located your wife, Anna and your son, Derrick, on Elysium. They were not hard to track down.”

The shadows didn’t hide the smile that displayed on Aria’s face from the information being presented. This enraged Lence and he moved quickly towards the Asari with an intent to defend his family, to only be jerked back quickly in place by the Krogan. The glow off the holo reflected upon the Batarian’s face as he stood there looking at him. Lence spat at him in disgust. “You, Batarians, are all monsters! You take pleasure on hurting innocent women and children in your slave-runs!” The verbal attack didn’t faze the four-eyed alien in front of him. Seeing the true aliens’ nature made him prouder to be working for Cerberus. He glared angrily at Aria. “Cerberus will protect my family from you, alien scum! You will never be able to get them!”

Aria’s grin widened. She raised her right hand and as if on cue, the doors to the room whisked open again, briefly allowing more light to pour in. Lence shielded his eyes and then when they adjusted, he looked ahead to see two more Krogan thundering in, dragging by the arms his wife and son. His wife had a nasty gash on her face while her son appeared unharmed. Both had tears stained on their faces. Lence’s heart stopped and he could feel a huge blow to his gut. His wife stopped crying when she saw Lence standing there. Her face horrified by his rough condition. “Daddy!” The son wailed for him as he tried to reach towards him from the Krogan’s arms.

“It will be okay, son.” Lence said comfortingly to his boy. He narrowed his eyes at his captor once more. “Let my family go, Aria!”

“All in due time. First, you must do something for me.” Aria warmly replied as she stepped closer to look at his family members. “Give me the codes and I’ll let you go.”

Lence shook his head firmly. “I can’t! I won’t betray Cerberus!”

Aria’s neutral face faltered, and disappointment filled her. “Can’t or won’t? Pity. Bray.”

The Batarian moved towards his wife and took out a knife. Anna screamed as she squirmed to break free from the Krogan. The toddler began to cry louder. That’s when Lence broke down. He couldn’t take it anymore. He couldn’t let his family suffer due to his allegiance. After all, he loved them as much if not more than the organization he worked for. He hung his head solemnly in defeat. “I’ll do it….”

Bray stopped and looked back over at Aria for her command. A thin smile spread across T’Loak’s lips. “What was that?” She purred to him.
Lence rose his head slowly, fighting every urge he had to not back down. “I said I’ll do it!” He looked at his terrified family sadly. “Just tell me what you want me to say.”

The Batarian moved closer to him and opened his omni once more. “I’ll snatch the recording. Pretend you are coming to their ships for assistance. Use your damn imagination. Give the command codes.”

“Make it believable.” Aria added. “Remember, your family is listening in.”

Lence closed his eyes and took a breath before he complied with the request. “This is Captain Lence. My voice recognition: Alpha, Tango, Zed. We took damage. Seeking repairs.”

Bray turned off the recorder and closed his tool. “Got it.”

Aria looked at the Krogan in the room. “Lock them all up here.”

Lence growled at her in anger. “We had a deal! You said we could be free!”

“You can be.” Aria said calmly to address him. “Once I have Omega back, I won’t be here. Then I guess C-Sec can find you.” She motioned for Bray and the others to follow her out.

Bray did as he was bid and glanced back wearily as he heard the child and woman sobbing as they clung onto their injured family member. He had no idea that Aria had another way to torture their prisoner. It proved that she would go to any lengths to get what she wanted. He was sort of shocked that she didn’t disclose this part of the plan to him. Did she still trust him? “Bray, notify the fleets to prepare for final checks.” Aria broke their silence as they made their way to the main floor of the club.

“What about Shepard?” Bray asked as they walked. “We need her combat skills.”

Aria didn’t answer first. Bray wondered if she was simply ignoring him or was she considering his argument. “She had her chance.” She hissed coldly. “You think you could change her mind?” She asked in contemplation.

He gave a shrug. “I could try.”

“Try harder then.” She snapped.

“She won’t take credits.” Bray shook his head. “She has more weapons than we can get on the black market.” He couldn’t think of anything else that may change her mind.

Aria seemed to have something else in mind. “Try harder.” She emphasized as she quickened her pace.

Bray scratched his head. “What?”

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The colony on Eden Prime had seen better days. Several housing structures were still standing, but a lot of their hydroponics were destroyed, and their irrigation system was busted. Krysta knelt to touch a boot print that was firmly placed in the dirt path that led them to the heart of the colony. Her gloved fingers moved along the edge. “Fresh tracks.”

“Cerberus?” Ashley looked on. Her helmet hiding most of her facial features.
Krysta stood back up and could feel her breath in her helmet. Were they walking into an ambush? “Could be…. let’s move ahead. Stay on guard.”

“You think any of the colonists are still here?” Liara asked she followed them down.

“Let’s hope they managed to escape. I wouldn’t put it past Cerberus to take prisoners. This whole place looks deserted.”

“It does…just like before.” Krysta observed. The whole scene was haunting to her. Years ago, when she arrived at Eden Prime, the place was bare and dead colonists were scattered about. She managed to speak with some who were lucky enough to find hiding places before the Geth arrived with Saren. She remembered Kaidan standing by her side as she interrogated some, gaining knowledge about what happened between Saren and Nihlus. His thoughts and insight made to her after every conversation. Then there was Ashley. Part of the company two twelve before her platoon was taken out. Williams was running for her life by Geth troopers before running into Krysta.

“Krysta?” Liara’s voice spoke louder. Shepard shook her head. “Huh?” She didn’t realize how much distance they had gained while she was reminiscing about her history on Eden Prime.

“I said the colony splits up ahead. Should we head towards the labs first to see what they uncovered that would spark Cerberus’ attention or search for survivors first?” Liara looked at her worriedly. Her brow furrowed showing that she was troubled for her friend.

“Labs first. I need to know their motive. If they hadn’t found it yet, maybe we can beat them to it.” Krysta said with determination in her voice. She had to get the one up on the Illusive Man. She had to beat him after losing on the Mars archives. Why couldn’t she focus? She had to get Kaidan off her mind. She had to make herself move on. If his ghost anchored her down, then she was going to drown in her thoughts and cost the lives of everyone that was depending upon her.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Warning: Sexual Content

Krysta decides it's best to have some shore leave and she seeks out Bray to discuss their emotions

Inspired by the song "Fever Rift" By Comaduster.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE: CHAPTER 24

“Normandy, you are clear for docking.”

“Roger that, Citadel Control. Thank you. Heading to our designated berth now.” Joker’s finger hastily moved over the controls to direct their vessel. He grinned up to Krysta who was standing behind his pilot’s chair, still donned in her armor. “I thought you said we were here for shore leave, Commander.”

“We are.” Krysta’s eyes stayed on the window that overlooked their starboard side.

“Ahem. The clothes? Come on. You really think that someone is going to attack us on the docks?” He paused as if he recalled a previous memory. “That’s right… Feros. Good times.”

“That was long ago, Joker.” Krysta didn’t make eye contact with him. Feros was a distant memory to her anymore.

“Yeah. The Geth… guess they are too busy fighting the Quarians this time.” Morreau returned his attention to the helm as the SR-1 hooked up with the magnetic locks. The ship nudged sharply from the attachment.

Krysta steadied her feet from the sudden shift of the floor beneath her. “Tell the others to meet up in three days.” She moved towards the exit door. She wasn’t too keen on the idea of slowing down while they had so many things to handle, but her entire crew was exhausted mentally and physically, herself included. She had to take a break, or she may not be able to handle the real fight ahead: Taking back Earth.

“What? No party?” Joker called out with disappointment. He slowly rose up from his chair and limped towards her direction. “That’s right… you have that sweet apartment of Anderson’s to try out. Definitely party.”

“Maybe tomorrow night.” Krysta slipped out of the ship, avoiding any further conversation as she picked up a swift pace towards the dock’s elevator. Her crew all had their own agendas for shore leave, but the idea of a party was one that circulated the most. She wasn’t too sure if Joker intentionally did that or if others felt the way. She needed time to herself. She needed to see someone. Deciding on changing out of her clothes, she moved towards Anderson’s apartment to quickly find something else to wear. David Anderson disclosed that he already took the liberty of
ordering her wardrobe to be sent there. She wouldn’t linger too long. Everyone knew where she
would be staying. She had her own private agenda.

*****************

Aria T’ Loak didn’t look too pleased as Krysta entered Purgatory later that evening. Bray was
nowhere in sight; a slight disappointment. Fear crept the back of her mind. What if he left? What if
something happened to him while she was away? She was ready to face the emotional turmoil that
swirled in her mind like a typhoon, but was she too late? Now placed in awkward position, she
hesitated at the steps, trying to act like she had no plans on really seeing Aria, but was there on other
business. Her bamboozled expression gave her away. “Not here to see me?” Aria called out to her.
Krysta could tell that she was eying Krysta’s attire, unlike her normal armor that she wore.

“Surprised you are still here.” Krysta moved down the steps to speak with her. “I figured you were
back at Omega. Or did you give that up?”

The statement made the Asari glower at her. “Since you are not willing to help me, I am working out
all the details before I move ahead. Don’t worry. I don’t need your help.”

“Fine.” Krysta waved her hand to dismiss the earlier task set before her. “I was going to work on
uniting the merc groups here like you asked since I have some time on the station.”

“That so?” Aria tossed out casually. As much as she was hiding it, Krysta could tell that this perked
her up. Just like she suspected, Aria still was needing her and probably was holding back her forces
until she could join in. Would this really help her against the Reapers? She could acquire more ships
from Aria once the takeover was complete. This would be a huge blow to Cerberus. Krysta felt like
some payback against the Illusive Man. She was still pissed after his agent, Kai Leng, took out
Thane. She couldn’t wait to find the son of a bitch again. Maybe taking back the station would draw
them out.

“Yes. Just send me the details and I’ll get to work in a few days.” Krysta’s mood slumped. She was
hoping to see Bray on the station and finally have time to really thank him for what he did.

Aria picked up on this. “It’s his night off.”

“I need to speak with him.” Krysta replied sternly as she kept her tone more serious. “The Alliance
wanted to thank him for his assistance on the Citadel Attack.”

“The Alliance? Or you?” A sly smile spread across Aria’s thin lips as she played into this. “He
normally goes down to Chasm down in the lower wards. I think this place is too upbeat for him.”
She shrugged off the opinion meaninglessly.

“Thanks.” Krysta pivoted on her heel to head out of Purgatory, but she couldn’t go too far, before
she heard Aria call back to her.

“Tell him that he’s due back here in the morning.”

*****************

Bray guzzled down the last few drops of the ale that was in his cup before wiping the foam off his
lips with the back of his hand. Chasm was one of the less occupied bars on the Citadel. The clientele
was complete opposite than on Purgatory: Dress down species, mostly Batarian refugees, a few
scattered humans and then a handful of Asari servers. The music was dark with pulsing tones that
riveted in his ears, not fast and upbeat like Purgatory. The music reminded him of the clubs he
sometimes would frequent on Khar’ Shaan in his earlier years while the patrons reminded him of
Omega. He missed his ‘home.’ His glossy over eyes panned over the groups nearest to him. A few
humans were moving their heads slightly with the beat of the music while commencing in idle chatter with their friends. A few sat alone to just take in the atmosphere, similar to what he was doing. Pushing his empty glass aside, he pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. Inhaling the smoke through his nostrils.

Hearing a few of the males spark up their conversations, he turned to see what their attention was on. That’s when he saw her. Krysta Shepard walking in. She was not dressed in attire accustomed to those that frequent Chasm. She in fact matched ones that entered Purgatory instead. Her dress was glimmering and long with a very revealing cleavage in the front. The close-fitting form didn’t leave much to the imagination. He tried not to let his eyes linger too much on her to grab her attention, but it was hard to deviate. He gently licked at his lips, feeling himself become aroused from her appearance, but then realized what was happening below. Becoming embarrassed, he shifted his body on his chair and turned his eyes away, pretending he didn’t notice her walking in.

It was hard to hear her heels approaching from the bass of the music as he kept his head down. “Bray?” Her voice called to him.

He looked up at her and tried not to let his fingers shake too much as he held onto his cigarette, remaining calm. “Shepard. See that you’re back. What brings you here?” He forced himself to act disinterested to her presence.

“I was looking for you.” Krysta’s voice shook slightly as she stood there.

“What for?” He snubbed out the cigarette into the table’s ash tray.

“Quit the act.” Her voice cut sharply like a knife. “You and I both know what’s going on.”

“Set on fire…we just need to know for sure.” The lyrics in the music played, almost narrating their true unspoken words.

Bray lifted an eye ridge. Was his sexual drive deceiving his ears? He gulped slightly as her hardened gaze stayed on him. “Let’s talk in private.” He rose up to move to the kiosk to pay for one of the back rooms. Surprisingly without argument, Krysta was following him.

After a few minutes of securing a room, he found himself now completely alone with her, but the club’s music was still playing through the room’s interior speakers, but the volume was lowered. The chorus continued, “Set on fire…this fever’s rift is open.”

Surprisingly, Krysta made the first move as she approached him in the darkened lit small room; just large enough to fit a bed only. “You have no idea what I have been through…what my past relationship was like.”

“If you were used to having relationships, your last sentence would have insulted him, but Bray never really was serious with anyone. A few flings here and there with a few of the entertainers on Omega. He learned while on the station that nothing lasted forever so why hoping that it would. Life was that cruel and he saw how cruel it could be. It wasn’t like he loved her, and she loved him. “You got it.” His brown eyes almost sadly looked at her. “You think you can be with a Batarian?”

“I haven’t tried it.” Shepard admitted. “Why the hell not?” She reached behind her to unzip her dress
just enough to allow the silk garment fall of her slim, muscular, scarred body. Several scar marks
were seen along her chest, side, arms and legs from her previous battles. Her luscious soft breasts
were fit and seemed more alluring than the Asari he encountered. She noticed him staying in place,
eying her body hungrily. “You going to get undressed?”

He fumbled for his pants eagerly, but felt her fingertips move over his to help him. He looked up at
her in bewilderment and caught her eyes looking at him. Unable to control the emotions that were
harnessing inside, he leaned over, capturing her lips hungrily with his in a fury. She matched his
intensity as her hands worked off his pants and shirt. Both of their naked bodies touching one
another. He felt her shoving him onto the bed as her body moved on top of his. Their lips met again,
and he groaned into her mouth as he felt himself touching up against her warm inviting entrance. His
hands moving onto her back, firmly holding her into place. He bucked his hips to allow himself to
penetrate her, unable to wait any longer for what he desired. A slight gasp escaped her lips and then
she murmured as she allowed him to slide inside. Grabbing her soft hips, gripping tightly, digging his
fingernails into her flesh, he pivoted his body and flipped her onto her back with him on top. He
pushed his hips down, driving him down more inside her. Her head snapped back as euphoria
overwhelmed her, moaning loudly. Their bodies glistening in sweat as momentum picked up; Bray
slowed the pace to savor the moment. He could feel her fingertips along the small of his back, tracing
up and down in sync with his thrusts. Krysta closed her eyes to take in the pleasure that was
overwhelming her body. Her body quivered and desired more. She longed for more like a druggie.
She remembered what it felt like to take a hit of red sand on Earth when she ran with the gangs, but
this was twenty times compared to that. Closing her eyes, she wished that this rush never ended.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Krysta Shepard is haunted by the deaths of her friends. Will Bray persuade her in helping Aria retake Omega?

Black smoke filled her field of vision like a veil. Krysta stumbled through the darkness. Her senses were dull. She could not smell the cloud that engulfed her nor feel it touching her flesh. The smoke didn’t not strangle her as one would normally find. She could vaguely make out shapes of unknown structures off in the distance: Their frames like Asari architecture. “Hello?” She called out to the nothingness. No one was around. Where the hell was she? She walked deeper within the smoke, but its matter would not dissipate. “Anyone around here?”

“Ah, Shepard. Good to see you. I just wanted to go over some tissue samples.” Mordin’s voice called out to her. He seemed so close, but she couldn’t find him anywhere.

“Mordin?” She stopped and looked around, yearning to see his smiling face. “I thought you died on Tuchanka…did you survive the shroud?” No response. “Mordin?” His distinctive voice called out to her again, soft like a whisper, garbled to make the words incoherent. She moved ahead, unclear on which direction her old Salarian friend went. Once again, she was alone.

“Shepard, good to see you again.” Kaidan’s voice called to her this time. “I was thinking about Saren and the Geth. You have a moment to chat?”

Krysta froze again and could feel the tears filling her eyes. “Kaidan…. Her head whipped around frantically as she desperately sought him out. Just like Dr. Solus, he was nowhere to be found. “Please…answer me.” Her words choked in her throat. Silence once again consumed the air. “No…” She darted ahead in a sprint, blind to her path, determined to find her lost love.

“Shepard, by the code, I am sworn to you.” Samara’s voice played out in the dark mist.

“What…Samara…. Krysta froze suddenly in her tracks. It wasn’t that long ago when she went to the monastery where Ardat-Yakshi’s sought refuge from the rest of their species to avoid any harm and learn to control their longings and powers. She shook her head in disbelief. “It can’t be…” Seconds later, the haunting wails of Banshees filled the air. Their eerie calls brought sudden chills to her body. Alert, Krysta stood her guard, wishing that she had a gun with her, but oddly there was none holstered by her armor. There was no way she could bring down a Banshee or even more than one, not even with her biotic abilities. The monastery was a tough fight as it was with weapons and her squad to back her up. Their hollow glowing blue eyes appeared in the smoke, multiplying quickly. She was surrounded and fatally outnumbered. Their wails screeched through the air in a mass flood. The sound was so pulsing to her ears that she went to cover them up, only to spring up quickly in her bed. Her body drenched in sweat as her heart raced in her chest. Her breath in rapid
succession. She looked down at her hands and body to only realize that she was still in the same room she was in earlier that evening with Bray, still naked after their session.

The Batarian snapped awake and moved quickly to her side after hearing her. “What’s wrong?” He glanced around for a weapon, should the need arise.

“Shit…it was just a dream.” Krysta uttered in between breaths, not really answering him. She tried to slow down her breathing as she ran her fingertips through the top of her hair.

“Sounds like a fucked up one.” Bray groggily rolled his head from side to side to crack his bones and then laid back, placing his hands behind his head, interlacing his fingertips.

Krysta looked down back at him. “You have no idea.” A part of her wanted to share it while the other seemed offended that he didn’t comfort her as she would have privately hoped. Then again, she was the one that told him she didn’t want any strings attached to their sex. He was only listening to her wishes or perhaps, he really didn’t care at all. Seeing Kaidan again in some form really pained her. Was she wrong to sleep with him?

Bray glanced up her way as if he read her thoughts. “You want to share? I’ll listen.” His pose didn’t flinch as all four of his eyes stared at her face.

Krysta hesitated, debating if she would indulge in telling him or not. Besides, what she shared with Kaidan was between them, then again, this guy did go at lengths it seemed to learn more about her past relationships. “Just old crewmates…they died in battle. I guess it won’t be long before I join them. I just hope I’m able to stop the Reapers while doing it.”

Bray held his gaze. “What makes you think you will die?”

“This war is going to get tougher as it goes along. I’m not even at the end of it. I’m losing squadmates at each turn.” She scoffed, “If only I could go up against the mercs…Blue Suns, Eclipse or Blood Pack. All three would be nowhere close to this.”

“You lost someone recently?” He asked sincerely. The question caught her off guard. It seemed really interested in what she had to say.

“Samara…she was a Justicar that had two daughters that were Ardat-Yakshi. The Reaper forces struck the monastery, turning the Asari students into Banshees. One didn’t survive, and the monastery was in ruins. Her last daughter was the sole survivor.”

“I thought you said she died.”

“Her code forbade the allowance of Ardat-Yakshi outside the monastery walls into the populace. She chose death instead of killing her daughter.” Krysta sighed hard as she relived the scene in her head. “I couldn’t stop her.”

“Sounds like a shitty code.” Bray stared up at the room’s ceiling.

A chime from her omni tool made Krysta lean over the bed’s edge to pick up her device to answer the inbound call. “This is Shepard.”

“Hey…I don’t know where you are. I came by the apartment to check it out with EDI and no answer. Everything okay?” Joker came through the other side.

Krysta eyed Bray carefully. “Yeah…I’m out in one of the clubs.” She had no idea on how many hours had transpired since arriving at Chasm. She could hear the music softly playing in the room.
“Something you need?”

“Partier? Wow, didn’t know that, Commander. Well. I finally got reservations at that swank sushi joint I was telling you about for this evening. Please say you will come. I mean, reservations at this place happens only once in a lifetime!” The pilot seemed almost begging for her company.

“I’ll be there. Just send a reminder to me on what time.” Krysta ended the call and then glanced to see that it had been six hours since she met up with Bray. “I need to head back to my apartment. I need a bath.” She swung her legs out of the bed’s edge and could feel the mixture of fluids and sweat on her skin.

“I need to get my ass up. My shift started two hours ago.” Bray moved to his own side to gather his belongings.

Krysta slipped on her underwear and watched him briefly. “Not a word to Aria. I don’t want her nose in my business.”

The name of his employer made Bray cringe. He totally forgot Aria’s previous demand of him: He needed to get Shepard on board with taking over Omega. He contemplated if he should bring it up now or not. He decided to gently plug in the plea. “Aria is wanting to help you.”

Krysta glared at him. “Bullshit. I know her game.” The sudden implication that the deal was brought up again made her upset. Was his whole agreement in sleeping with her a ploy to get her help with retaking Omega? Or was it only to get his kicks? Maybe both. What were her intentions? Inwardly, she considered the same. What were her intentions? Was she using him to just release tension that consumed her? The Batarian had it made being Aria’s personal lapdog on the station. He wasn’t in constant firefights, watching his friends die by the hands of the Reapers or Cerberus.

Bray picked up on her attitude change. She was cold and guarded. Why she did repel him so? “I’m not trying to take his spot.” He switched directions back to her own conflictions.

Krysta paused as she was fixing her dress. Her hot, wet skin made the material cling to her more and she moved her legs from side to side in an attempt to get more comfortable till she got back to her apartment. Her brown eyes homed in on him and her jaw tightened. “You never could.” She hissed lowly.

Bray’s bottom jaw dropped slightly from her rebuttal and he could see the pain that filled his face. He wasn’t expecting her icy statement. Without another word, he moved from the room with the door closing behind him seconds later. Exasperated, Krysta growled and punched the wall hard with her fist. “Fuck!”

Purgatory’s iconic techno music was uplifting compared to the tunes from Chasm. The scenery never changed from the multitude of the mixed species laughing and drinking with one another. Fresh from a quick shower at his place, Bray trudged down the steps that led to where Aria was sitting, avoiding eye contact with his boss. “Sorry, I’m late,” He murmured under his breath.

“Had fun?” Aria casted a glance towards him with a look of displeasure. She seemed really bothered about something. Her arms were crossed, and her eyes stayed away from him. He knew whenever she was this tense that a complete shit storm was about to happen. He could feel himself silently wincing as he predicted her unleashing a biotic singularity up his ass as she always threatened should he cross her again.

“Had a few drinks.” He took his normal position at her side.
“She came by here looking for you.” Her words played into his fear. She knew.

Deciding to not add kindling to the fire, he sighed heavily and tapped his fingertips along the butt of his rifle. “Look, Aria-“

She stood up quickly making him close his mouth from speaking further. Her back was to him for several seconds before she finally spun around to face him. “I hate this place, Bray.”

“It’s definitely not Omega.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her voice became cold, “I never knew that you had it in you, Bray. I’m impressed. After you fucked her, did she finally agree to help with overtaking Omega? My forces are ready. The longer I sit here the more pissed I’m becoming.” Rubbing the back of his neck nervously, Bray contemplated if he should disclose what Shepard’s opinion was of Aria or not. His hesitation seemed to irk the pirate queen even more. “Damnit, Bray.”

“I-I’ll speak with her again.” He stammered.

“This time speak with her and then get your kicks. I want General Petrovsky’s life.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Krysta and the others throw a party after defeating her clone, but will Aria wait around much longer to take back Omega?

Inspired by "Bring Me To Life" By Evanescence

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 26

“How are you doing this evening? Anything you require further?” Glyph asked the guests of the party that night as it hovered throughout each of the rooms. The patrons disregarded the drone as they were too busy focused on their own conversations or activities. The only guest that responded with a gentle wave was Liara T’Soni. Krysta expected as much since she was the Shadow Broker and Glyph was her personal assistant.

Surprisingly, Jack approached the floating drone with a wicked smile on her lips. “Yeah, what about more booze? None of that cheap shit. Shepard, you buyin’ all this right?” The woman tossed her way.

Krysta rolled her eyes playfully and flipped Jack off in a friendly manner. She strolled through the apartment’s open floor plan to find Zaeed sitting at the bar alone. Several empty glasses were in front of him and an opened bottle of whiskey was to his right. His hand held it with a death grip as if he expected someone to snatch it away.

His one good eye took notice of her approach, but he never turned his head to acknowledge her. “Let a man drink, Shepard.” He grumbled.

“Why are you not celebrating like everyone else, Zaeed?” She took the barstool next to him. They fought hard against her clone’s forces and it almost seemed as if they couldn’t take a chance to just unwind while on the much-needed shore leave. It was coming to an end tomorrow morning at o five hundred hours and everyone just needed to vent however they could.

Zaeed lifted the bottle in his hand and then took a swig directly out of it. “I am.”

Krysta gently laughed as she removed the hair that had fallen in her eyes as she sat down. “Zaeed Massani, I never thought you would be a brooder.”

The ex-Blue Suns merc gave her a sideways glance as he sat his bottle down. “We lost good people, Shepard. Samara was a damn waste. I should have been there.”

Krysta exhaled hard and shook her head. “She made her choice. I couldn’t stop her.”

“A good kid. I liked her.” Zaeed mused softly.

The statement interested Krysta. She cocked an eyebrow and looked at him. “Her mind? Her skills?”

“Sure.” Zaeed finally looked at her squarely. “What do you think?”
This amused Shepard. “Figures with you,” She chortled; catching on what he was implying. There was no denying it. Once the Asari hit their matriarch stage, they picked up other distinctive features.

“Old Zaeed was meant to be alone.” He shook his head. “Damnit. What I was thinkin. Asari have fine asses, but she was a killer. Heh. I liked her.”

“You know, she could have killed you.” Krysta played off his comments.

“I have lived this long.” Zaeed exhaled through his nose as he studied his empty glasses, picking one up and letting the rim touch his fingertips. “I figured I could live a little longer.”

Going back to his earlier statement, Krysta asked, “No one else special in your life?” As she thought about it, she never really took the time to get to know Massani even when he was on her ship when they were fighting the Collectors. Felt like now she was running out of time.

“No.” He lifted his head to stare ahead without any focus. “I have a son…shit, somewhere. Hell, if I know.”

“A son?”

“Yeah. His mum didn’t want him to get involved with all my affairs. Took him away from me…I guess he’s grown up now.”

“You never contacted him?” Krysta became deeply concerned as she learned more about his past. Zaeed glared at her angrily. “Mind your damn business, Shepard. You’re crossing the line now.”

She held up her hand in defeat. “Forget it.”

“Zaeed, care to get our shots in?” Garrus broke up their conversation as he moved into the same section of the apartment. He held up his sniper rifle with a grin on his face.

Krysta tossed him a playful smile. She wasn’t too sure if Garrus had picked up on her conversation with the distressed merc or if he was all work and no play like always. Garrus gave her a wink back. A thin smile crossed the merc’s lips as he quickly moved up from his seat. “I’m game, Garrus.”

“Good. I found some weak points in the structure. Shepard, your security system on this place is very cheap.” The turian pointed out matter-of-factly.

“I guess you will handle that, Vakarian.” She waved them off and slid off the barstool, deciding on where to go next.

“I’m on it.” Garrus snapped to attention and pivoted on his heel to walk off with Zaeed. His response was not sarcastic in nature at all and Shepard couldn’t help, but grin. A turian through and through. All work and no play mentality. She began to wonder just how close to Primarch he really was that he never let onto on Menae.

She paused on leaving the area she was at. She began to think about to their previous encounter with her clone. She and Brooks tried to steal the Normandy and steal her identity with the Citadel Archives. The Illusive Man never disclosed that he created a clone. Was he that prepared in the event she should fall to the Reapers? Surely her team would know that the clone was not the same person. How would he handle that scenario? Was he betting that they wouldn’t survive the Omega 4 Relay? Or would he have a contingency plan in place to hunt and kill all of them before the word got out? The more she thought about this, the more it confused and angered her. It seemed as if the clone and Brooks went rogue away from Cerberus. Surprisingly, he didn’t bother to clear up the mess. Luckily for her, the clone did not do anything to damage her reputation. Like she cared. She dealt with the
Council when she went up against Saren. They tried to hold her back on several times and Udina tried his best to appease them, but to only his advantage. She knew deep down he wanted to promote himself and not really help humanity. He showed his true colors when Cerberus attacked the station. She defied the Council at every turn, doing things her way. That was the only way to accomplish anything. To be ruthless. Garrus saw this when he took out Dr. Saleon. It changed him though his actions did scare her some when they went up against Sidonis and Harkin. She never dreamed he would have that dark side even when he stood his ground against the mercs on Omega.

Her thoughts circled back to her clone. Was this the answer she was looking for earlier on? Cerberus had the technology to create a life like her to the cell. Was she really who she thought she was? Was she too genetically altered by the Illusive Man? Did he somehow to change her sex drive in a cruel attempt to remove all feelings she had to Kaidan. She never would expect Cerberus to purposely drive someone towards aliens, but what if the change faltered some? Could that really be possible? Genetics and biology were never her forte, and now she wished for Mordin to be alive still. This could be a question for him. She debated if she should direct this back to Chakwas. Realizing that all the internal debates were bringing her down, she picked up the half empty bottle that Zaeed left on the counter and poured her a shot.

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Word spread like wildfire throughout the streets and Purgatory that Commander Shepard was hosting a private party at her newly acquired apartment building that once was residence to the well-known David Anderson. The timing was not the greatest and the crowd would be a huge distraction, but Bray didn’t have a choice. He had to get Krysta on board before Aria dragged him off the station tomorrow to retake Omega from Cerberus forces. Donning civilian clothes, he made his way through the crowd on the Silversun strip to the apartment complex.

He felt so out of place without his armor and being practically one of the few Batarians that were on that level of the station. A group of hopeful partygoers were in front of him: a pair of Asari and a male human. Luckily for him, no one recognized him as being one of Aria’s. She was not a big player on the Citadel as she hoped to be. No one really cared if she was there or not. This wasn’t Omega. The Asari were busy chattering eagerly amongst one another about what all they wanted to do at the party. Bray shoved his hands in his pockets as he straggled back from them. It was ironic that he was on the other end of trying to get inside an exclusive event. A line would be wrapped outside Afterlife at all hours of the day on Omega and only half would be allowed entry. He had to man the front entrance a few years in his career and he never thought that he would be one of those.

A crowd had formed out of Shepard’s door and each group were taking turns to try to gain entrance. An unknown Krogan was manning the entrance through a video display. His facial tone was serious, but it seemed as if he enjoyed denying entry. After waiting thirty minutes, the group in front of him went their turn. The man smiled widely when the Krogan came to the screen. “What do you want?” The reptilian alien barked.

“I’m from Citadel News. I wanted to get the exclusive on this party. May I speak with Commander Shepard?” The man spoke very confidently and almost a braggart. This aroused a smirk on Bray’s lips. He couldn’t stand pompous individuals like the man before him and was hoping that the krogan would turn him away to hurt his pride.

“No.” The krogan snapped quickly. The screen went black. Bray couldn’t hold in the chuckle that poured out of his mouth.

The Citadel News representative turned his head to look in the Batarian’s direction. “Hmph! You really think someone by your look is going to get in, Batarian?” He wrapped his arms around both shoulders of the Asari that were standing on each side of him. The two giggled at this comment as they looked at Bray in amusement.
Bray stepped closer. “I have a shot like you.” He moved around them to be granted his turn.

A few seconds later the screen flickered to life and the same Krogan’s face stared at him emotionlessly. “Name?”

“Bray.”

“You’re not on the list.” The reply was just as short, and the screen went off again.

The man laughed loudly at the rejection and wiped the tears from his eyes. “What did I tell you?”

“Fuck off.” Bray glared at him, before standing firm where he was and pushed the button again. He was not about to give up.

The screen came back on, the Krogan appeared to be amused that he was not going anywhere. “You’re not on the list.” The screen went dark again. The Asari giggled behind him.

“Move aside!” An impatient Vorcha called to him. “My turn.”

Bray growled as he narrowed his eyes at the screen. He had to get in.

Krysta moved towards the door where Grunt was manning it. He didn’t move from that position for about an hour now and she could hear him chuckling from time to time. “I could have Glyph handle this, you know.” Krysta took to his side as she looked at him. Why were some of her teammates ‘working’ when they should be relaxing? She thought maybe it was a Krogan trait, but Wrex was having fun challenging Liara to a biotic competition. She just hoped that none of the furniture would be wrecked.

“I could just shoot them.” Grunt shrugged his shoulders indifferently. “I have a live one though.”

“Oh?”

“Some Batarian. He won’t go away. They are stubborn.”

This held Krysta’s interest. “Batarian?” It couldn’t be…

“Yeah. Told him he wasn’t on the list.”

“Is he still out there?” Krysta felt her heart beat begin to race as she eyed the screen eagerly.

“Probably. Told him no several times.” Grunt flickered the screen back on and Bray was standing there with a look of annoyance painted on his brown face.

Bray noticed her now standing next to the krogan. The crowd applauded and cheered as they also took notice. Bray turned his head to look at them angrily. “Shut up!”

Grunt chuckled. “You have fans.”

“Grunt, let him in.”

“What?” He didn’t expect the order but shrugged again. “Fine.” He moved to open the door and quickly moved to where Bray could walk in, but block anybody else. Once Bray was inside, Grunt closed the doors again despite the pleas from the eager party goers.

“Bray, what are you doing here?” Krysta looked at him in disbelief.
“I need to talk to you. It’s urgent.”

A part of her wanted to deny him this because she was having a party and didn’t want to deal with anymore business, but she knew that he was being pressed by Aria T’Loak. She knew what he was there for and she had to give it to him for being persistent even if his Batarian ass was on the line from either side. Glyph floated over to greet the newcomer. “Good evening, sir. Shall I get you any refreshment?”

Not giving him a chance to reply, Krysta cut off the drone. “Not now, Glyph. Clear out the study. I need to talk to him in private.” She had no idea what rooms were occupied currently in the apartment.

“At once, Commander.” The drone obliged as it hovered towards the back of the apartment.

“This way.” Krysta turned to follow Glyph, hoping to avoid any unwanted attention on her and Bray from her crew, but she could only be so lucky. Within ten nanoseconds, Joker’s loudmouth picked up on them.

“You going to introduce us, Shepard?” He called out from where he was sitting on the couch with EDI. Everyone seemed to instantly pause in whatever they were doing and moved towards her location. Bray shifted a little uncomfortably as he stood behind her.

“Everyone! This is Bray. He’s one of Aria’s and has been helping me. Make him feel welcome.” She stood aside to introduce him. She could almost pick up on different private exchanges amongst her crew. Ashley and Vega gave each other silent looks, while Garrus and Zaeed stared at him with a bit of caution. The only ones to really acknowledge were Tali and Jack. The loyal Quarian clapped gently while Jack grinned from ear to ear.

“About time, Shep!” She jeered.

“Welcome.” Jacob finally spoke up as he looked at Miranda with concern. Krysta knew that they had entanglements before as well with Batarians while working with Cerberus. Jacob stopped a plot on the station.

“Glyph, let’s get this party pumpin! This is way too dull!” Jack turned to the drone.

“Of course. My apologies, Jacqueline, on your displeasure of my audio selection. I will find better tunes to your liking.” The drone responded.

“Jacqueline?” The statement of her true name seemed to offend the ex-con. “What the fuck? Don’t say that shit. Jack or Subject Zero. I’m done with everything else.”

“Of course, Ms. Jack. Music starting now.”

The apartment speakers blared faster dub music as the bass seemed to shake the room. Jack broke out in a dance to time her movements with the rhythms and threw her hands up in the air. “Yes! Let’s dance! Except for you, Shepard, because you suck.”

Steve chuckled as he joined in. “She’s right, Shepard.”

Krysta laughed and felt herself flush as she remembered that Bray was still standing there as they teased her. She thought back to the club under Afterlife and how she got Bray to dance with her to draw out Morinth. She couldn’t be that bad. “I have business, Jack.”
“Fuck business. We kicked ass today. Let’s party.” Jack moved towards the counter where drinks were at the ready and handed one to Bray. “Here you go, Bray.”

Bray looked at her, unsure, and then downed the drink in one gulp. “Not too bad.”

Jack chuckled. “There you go. Here, have another.”

Krysta laughed. “I don’t think he came here to get drunk, Jack.”

“We all did.” Jack argued playfully.

“True…” Tali’s voice was a bit slurried as she drank her own drink that was made for her species. Quarians and Turians were dextrose based and had to be careful of their intake. The Quarians were so susceptible to illnesses and germs, that they had the habit of being overly cautious on everything.

Bray chuckled from all the comradery and set his empty glass on the plate that Glyph was carrying to retrieve glasses once they were empty. “Hell, give me another. I haven’t had a decent drink since leaving Omega.”

“Yah! You’ll be one of us soon!” Jack applauded.

Krysta smiled as she watched her on. She found herself lost in his presence. Bray caught her gaze and smiled back at her. Was she truly falling for him? Was it becoming more than what she wanted in a relationship?

Garrus’ soft nudge to her side turned her away from her thoughts. He motioned her to the side and whispered to her, “Do you think we can trust him? He hasn’t really said why he’s here.” Zaeed, who was a few feet away from their conversation, nodded his head as if he already knew what Garrus was relaying to her.

“I know why he’s here.” Krysta spoke sharply as she looked back at Bray’s way. Aria wanted her help and was going to great lengths to get it. She was becoming impatient. Maybe retaking Omega would knock Cerberus back. After all, their incursions were making her battle against the Reapers even more difficult. Was Bray there only as an emissary to soften relations between the two? Could be to save his hind or was he there on other matters as well? Her mind was already made up that she was going to help Aria, but she didn’t want to disclose this to him yet. Secretively, she was afraid that once she gave him her answer, then he would leave. She wanted him to linger a little longer, even if it was only another hour. She debated the very idea of asking him to tag along on her squad once Omega was back. After all, Aria had to give a little if she provided the assistance. Half of her team seemed conflicted about him being around her, but she knew she could persuade them otherwise. After all, she did convince Tali to befriend a Geth and that took a lot of effort on her part.

Garrus was not to give up. “Shepard, look. I’ve always taken your side and you helped me a lot. I’ve been on Omega longer than you.”

Krysta’s fiery brown eyes met his soft blue ones. “I can handle it, Garrus. Thank you.” She cut him off coldly. Turning away from the crowd, she silently excused herself to return to her bedroom. She just needed to move away from the scene. The pressure was on her too much.

Her sudden leave made the entire group grow quiet. The only sounds now were the music still blasting. Liara bit her lip as she looked amongst the others. “Glyph, music at thirty percent volume.”

“Understood.” Glyph obliged the request and seconds later, the music was quieter.

“Party pooper.” Jack crossed her arms in annoyance. “What the hell did you say to her, Garrus?” Her
accusatory eyes went his way, recognizing him as the one closest to Krysta before she abruptly fled the party.

“Nothing,” Garrus stammered. “I was just giving her advice about how to handle-“

“The situation.” Bray butted in. “You don’t trust me.” He decided to clear the air. He knew how to read people and several people in the room really didn’t want him there. They only took to him because their commanding officer did so.

“We all know who you work for.” Zaeed spoke up, joining in on the conversation. He stepped closer towards the Batarian. “You are her errand boy.”

“I may work for Aria.” Bray’s voice grew louder as he felt himself becoming defensive. His fists clenching up. He didn’t expect a brawl, but he was ready if it came down to it. “But you don’t know the whole story.”

“Let’s just chill for a minute.” Ashley moved in the center of the group. “Shepard has a lot on her right now and we don’t need to argue and make things worse.”

“Everything was fine before he showed up.” Miranda squeezed her way through the group to become the center of attention next to Williams. Her dark eyes fell upon Bray. “Maybe you should just leave.”

Bray glanced upstairs to where Krysta went and shook his head. “No. I needed to speak with her.”

A dark aurora engulfed Miranda as she gathered dark energy to launch a biotic attack if necessary. “That wasn’t a suggestion.”

“Back off, cheerleader. He’s cool.” Jack moved around Bray to put herself between the two. “Shepard let him in, so he stays.”

“Fine by me.” Wrex shrugged.

“Goddess…” Liara held her head as she tried to figure out the predicament they were now in. “Look. Let’s just give Krysta some space. Bray, you said you needed to speak with her. Go on up there… everyone else, let’s just head out for a bit.”

“This party is dull.” Javik moved towards the door first. He opened the entrance to the group that was still waiting outside eagerly for a chance to participate. A Hanar was now amongst them.

“An Enkindled One! This one is not worthy of such an event!” The Hanar exclaimed in awe as it noticed Javik.

Javik groaned in annoyance and Liara quickly moved to usher him through. The rest of the group followed suit. Zaeed glanced back at Garrus. “Let’s hit the casino. I didn’t to go because Shepard took you instead with her.”

Garrus smirked. “I’m her favorite.”

“Not anymore.” Zaeed pointed out as he moved to head out first. “I have to stop take a piss first.”

Tali was the last one to leave and she glanced over at Bray. It was hard to see what kind of face she was giving him through her helmet. However, the tone of her voice gave it away. “If you hurt her,
“You Bosh ‘Tet….”

“I’m not.” Bray felt a little more relaxed now that he was away from the accusations. He moved up the stairs quickly towards her room and gently rapped on the door. “It’s me.” Seconds later, the door whisked open and he saw her sitting on the edge of the bed with her omni tool displayed.

Krysta lifted her head to address him. “Going toe to toe with Cerberus is not ideal. You don’t know how many forces they have on that station.”

“We don’t have a choice. When Aria wants something, she gets it. Plus, we have a plan. It will work.”

“Enlighten me.” Krysta stood up from the bed and closed her omni.

Bray rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “Aria knows most of the details. Once we land, we will have two ground teams. She will lead one and I will lead the other. Cerberus may have Omega, but Aria knows that station better than they do. It will work.”

“If you are so confident, then why the hell does Aria want me onboard so desperately?” Krysta hissed at him. “She is afraid she’s going to lose.”

“We are just not going up against Cerberus,” Bray’s voice grew dark. “There are adjutants lurking about.”

“What?”

“Creatures that Cerberus created using that Reaper tech that they salvaged from the Collector ship. Look, Aria made a deal with them to let them use Omega to gather the salvage.”

Krysta sighed hard. “From the ship I saved for him. Damnit, I believed him.”

“Those things are deadlier than Cerberus. If they touch you, you will become like them.”

“Aria failed to disclose that information.” She was going to be putting her ass on the line and it seemed like Aria wasn’t going to relay all the details. She didn’t like to be kept in the dark, especially when it came to not only risking her life, but the lives of others. Aria was a selfish individual and the trait was easily read. “When are we leaving?”

“Tomorrow. I can set up a meeting point with Aria.”

Krysta sighed hard and shook her head. “Shore leave was over anyways. Let me get this straight. Once we get on Omega, not only do I have to worry about my ass getting shot by Cerberus, but I also worry about becoming a Reaper freak.”

Bray cracked a smile. “You won’t be the only one if that makes you feel any better.”

“Time to put your training in use.” Krysta returned his smile softly.

“Glad you will be there with me. I really didn’t want to go in there alone.” The Batarian’s voice quivered as his emotions gushed out of his mouth.

“I’m not losing you, Bray. I’m tired of losing the ones close to me.” Krysta inched closer to him with her eyes transfixed upon him.

“You won’t.” He broke her gaze. “Didn’t think you would care about a Batarian…per your profile.” The need to kiss her filled him and he nearly shook to withhold the intent inside.
“Me either…” Krysta took his right hand with her own and used her left to draw his face back to her. “I’m tired of fighting it…this is who I am now.” She leaned in and deeply captured his lips with her own. He hungrily returned hers with equal passion and already felt her hands grabbing at his clothes. He panted as he broke the kiss and gently moved her hands away. She looked upon him with confusion. “What is it?”

Bray chewed his lip. “I can’t. Aria expected me back sooner to go over the details.” He cursed inwardly for being there upon her command and not his own.

Krysta shook her head defiantly and pulled him close to her once more. “Make her wait. You’re mine tonight.” She kissed him hard again and then playfully broke away, shoving him onto the bed onto his back. Before he had a chance to regain his position, she moved on top of him, clasping his hands with hers. Their mouths back at one another. He clutched at her back and pivoted his body to where he adjusted just enough to roll her onto her back and move on top of her. His body pressing down on hers as his hard breathing matched her own. His hands tore at her clothing as lust overpowered him. He kissed down her body, eager to taste her. Krysta snapped back her head as she felt him lowering himself down below. Euphoria consumed her.

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Next morning…

Bray waited dutifully in his armor at the dock while Aria was going over her battle strategy with Krysta in her sky cab. Moments later, the car returned, and Shepard exited the vehicle without giving a look to Bray. He knew she had to keep their relationship professional in the public’s eyes, especially with Aria. However, Aria, could read between the lines. It didn’t matter to her because it benefited her for now. Bray hoped that it would stay that way.

“Shepard, I’ll expect you to rendezvous at the coordinates shortly.” Aria called out to her as she sat in the cab, waiting for Bray to retake his place beside her. Krysta nodded her head but said nothing as she left the scene.

Once the vehicle doors shut, Bray finally spoke out. “I’ll get to my ship once we leave this place.”

“Change of plans, Bray.” Aria casually tossed out.

“Oh?”

“You will remain on the command ship with me.”

“Why the change?”

“Shepard will be there. Let’s just say that I want to keep her interest in this.”

He should have seen this coming. For now, he was a pawn in this game of hers. He didn’t have a say in the matter, but he could express his displeasure. “Aria, Shepard gave you her word.”

“Her word means shit to me. I have too much at stake” Aria cut at his argument as she looked his way then smiled to herself. “You have surpassed yourself this time, Bray. You are acting like an Asari now. I used our traits to take Omega from Patriarch. Never thought a Batarian would be just as successful.”

“I’m not using her,” Bray lowly growled at her, letting his feelings get the better judgment of him.

This didn’t faze her. She chuckled lightly to herself. “Relax, Bray. I’m proud of you. Not everyone
gets a chance to seduce a Spectre.”
Chapter Summary

Krysta finds everything going to hell on Omega. Will she regret helping Aria?

Avery OC Copyrighted to RPGWarrior4824

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 27

Klaxons deafened Krysta’s ears as smoke began to fill the flight deck of the stolen Cerberus cruiser. “Shields at sixty percent!” Bray strained his voice loudly to overcome the sirens. His fingers glided over the console as he routed power from non-essential areas of the ship to boost the shields as much as they could overcome.

The ship rocked violently careening an Asari violently into one of the consoles as she was trying to rush to another side of the deck to assist in rerouting the power. Her body bent into an unnatural position on the hard structure and then collapsed into the floor. Aria didn’t take any notice as she kept her eyes dead on the viewport that showed them heading straight into Omega’s orbit and the hellfire from the upgraded defense systems that Petrovsky boasted. Krysta clenched her teeth tightly as she held onto the back of Bray’s chair to avoid losing her footing as well. “This is fucking suicide! We need to evac!”

The Asari seemed to ignore her protest. “Bray, continue course! Go faster, damnit!” She gripped the rail in front of her.

Her Batarian companion didn’t flinch as he scrolled his finger on the screen to his right to increase boosters to their full capacity. Krysta was aghast on how quickly he followed her order even when they were plummeting to their sure deaths. The ship jerked hard again. “Shields down to thirty percent!” Bray announced.

Krysta turned her head sharply towards the deranged Asari. “Aria! Damnit! You can’t take back Omega if you’re dead!” She needed to get back to the war with the Reapers. She didn’t plan on dying on this mission.

Defeated, Aria sulked silently for a few seconds, before looking back up at the vid screen. “Fine. Sound the evac!”

Krysta tapped Bray on the arm right after the signal to grab his attention. “Get to the escape pod! Move your ass!” Seeing him get up, Krysta let relief overcome her as she darted through the fleeing occupants to the designated escape pod to where Aria took her side. There was no sign of Bray and Krysta went to unharness herself to look for him, but T’Loak grabbed her arm.

“He’s on another one!” Aria looked at her. “He’s leading the second ground team. He knows his orders.”

Krysta retook her seat and watched the pod’s door close. “You didn’t tell me that.” She fired back at
her. She didn’t like the idea of Bray being away from her. What if something went wrong with his pod? What if he was injured and still on the ship? She was leaving him there to die. As much as she hated it, she had to keep going.

**********

The predetermined flight path of Bray’s escape pod sent him and the other occupants crashing towards the docks of the station. The violent jolt slammed Bray back and forth against his harness. He clenched his eyes tightly, bracing himself physically and mentally for any impending doom to him. Seconds later, the movement stopped, and he slowly opened his eyes to see everyone else slipping out of their seats, brandishing their weapons. Myxan paused at the pod’s door with her back pressed against the wall. “I hear them coming.” She was a purple toned Asari, still in her maiden stage. One of Aria’s top adepts and had superior tech skills.

“Of course, they are. Why would they not?” Wur growled in her direction. The dark toned Krogan lumbered next in line. He was centuries old and had tons of battle scars across his face.

“How many are there?” Chaner followed next. Another krogan, lighter skin tone showing that he was much younger than Wur. Krogan’s skin tone darkened as they grew old. He didn’t have that many scars and would be considered too green from Wur. Chaner was checking his rifle’s clip as he spoke.

“I don’t know…it’s hard to see. There’s too much debris outside from the crash.” Myxan whispered.

“Let’s get out there. We need to get the hanger doors open. We are about twenty meters away from the main control. Wur and Chaner, you hold them back while I escort Myxan over there.” Bray joined them as he thought back to the schematics he reviewed prior to the start of this mission. Even with the evacuation, they were still on point of their task.

“I can handle them.” Wur jumped out of the pod and opened fire on the approaching Cerberus forces, roaring loudly at his foes. Chaner took his side and followed suit. Bray could hear Cerberus returning fire and felt the bullets striking the exterior wall of the pod.

Grabbing Myxan’s hand, Bray pulled her out of the pod and towards the direction of the door’s control. He ducked and felt a bullet graze off his kinetic shields. With the Krogan distraction, they had brief window to override the controls to let the rest of Aria’s remaining forces inside and out of harm’s way. Myxan knelt with her omni tool and initiated her hack program. “Standby.”

“How long will this take?” Bray glanced wearily towards the ever-growing Cerberus forces moving in their direction. He didn’t like the idea that they were away from the heavy hitters. His team was limited in numbers for right now, but Krogan were resilient fighters and had redundant nervous systems.

“Hopefully not long…” Myxan kept her eyes focused on her omni tool as her fingertips worked fast on the tool. “Just make sure I don’t get my ass shot while I’m standing here.”

As he feared, a pocket of soldiers turned towards their direction while the remaining of the forces went towards the Krogan. “Shit. I’ll do what I can.” He moved to place his body between hers and his to make himself a shield. Taking cover was not an option. He couldn’t let her be exposed. Aria had to get her forces on Omega or they couldn’t take back the station and that was their priority. He wondered how Krysta was fairing with her. He had no idea where they crashed landed at. There was no word yet and it wasn’t like he could pause the battle to call them. Raising his assault rifle, he aimed towards the approaching soldiers and squeezed the trigger. The rounds fired off in rapid succession, tearing through their shields quickly due to the black market fitted disruptor caps. He didn’t let go as he kept firing, tearing through the armor and hitting vital organs. The closest adversaries groaned as they stumbled over to their deaths. However, five more soldiers took their
place and he felt the sharp sensation in his left arm as one round ripped through his own shields, shattering his armor. The impact knocked him back and he winced through the pain as blood began to soak his armor. “Damnit!” He hissed through his teeth as he glanced at the open gaping wound then looked towards the offending soldier. Aiming his gun, fighting back the pain, he opened fire and nailed his opponent in the head, splattering his brains all over the floor. “Fuck you!” He yelled at the corpse as he could feel his arm throbbing. The other two soldiers were taken down by the Krogan gunfire. “Took you long enough.”

The Krogan lifted their rifles in victory and cheered. “Got it!” Myxan announced. Perfect timing!

Bray didn’t hesitate and tapped his ear comm. “Aria, this is Bray.” The few seconds to answer made him hold his breath.

“I’m here.” Aria’s voice sounded exhausted as if she too herself endured her own opposition. “Hanger doors are opening.” “Meet me at the rendezvous point.” The line clicked off. He didn’t expect a thank you from Aria. He was accustomed to her cold calculative personality.

A green pigmented skin male Salarian ran up to Bray’s group outside the bunker on D Deck. Bray recognized him as Alik Bomor, the leader of the third ground team. They were to go to D Deck if they were closest and make sure it was secure. Unwelcome news was plastered all over his amphibian face. “The canons are offline.”

What else was going to go wrong that day? Bray gritted his razor-sharp incisor and looked across the orange hue sky. He could hear an approaching thunderous ground impact. Something was coming, and it was heavy. Mechs! Now was not the time to have their only hope to take down a well armored mech to be out of order. “Aria is on her way here. I need them online now!”

“Hacking was not his expertise and all he could make out from the jargon was that they were screwed if they didn’t have the canons online before the mechs arrived. Shoving Alik out of the way, he moved towards the tech that was knelt at the canons’ control panel. “Move your scrawny ass!”

The orange skinned Salarian looked up at him with his large bulbous eyes, his jaw dropped slightly from the order. Even with a STG background, the Salarian was not used to be spoken to in such a manner. Omega clearly didn’t rub off on him. “I’m working on it!” He stammered as he returned to his task.

“We have heavies!” A human merc shouted nearby, pulling their attention towards the east where the bulk of the Cerberus forces were pouring from including two mechs at the rear.

“We have heavies!” A human merc shouted nearby, pulling their attention towards the east where the bulk of the Cerberus forces were pouring from including two mechs at the rear.

“Get in front! Don’t let them break the line! We need to secure the canons!” Bray pointed towards the entrance of the bridge. He then turned his head towards where his Krogan were standing. “You two, protect the Salarian!” Their ground teams consisted of Humans, Batarians, Salarians, Asari and Krogan. Aria was always very diverse, but he knew which races were stronger. Each had their own strengths and weaknesses. He had to exploit all of it to know where to place them. The Krogan were the toughest to bring down and they had to act as shields for a contingency plan. If Cerberus got through his front line, they had to buy the tech some more time. The Asari adepts already placed a biotic barrier, while the Batarians and the Humans stood in the center. They would be the fodder. Standing behind the front line, Bray would keep his eyes out peeled to make sure there was no break
in the line. As they neared, Cerberus began to open fire, but their bullets struck the barrier without any real damage. It was only a matter of time till the barriers would fail. The Humans and Batarians returned fire to take out any forces that would try to knock out the Asari. That would be Cerberus’ first objective. So far, his placement of his forces was very advantageous. Perhaps, his background with the Hegemony was useful somewhat after all. The medigel patch that was given to him upon travel did seem to congeal the blood and he could feel his pain in his arm subsiding for now.

Moments later, the barriers were taking a pounding and he could hear the Asari groaning as they pushed their biotics to the envelope to withstand the firepower. “Can’t hold much longer!” Myxan yelled through gritted teeth. The mechs were now in firing range. One fired a missile and struck the biotic blockade on the right, fizzling out their first line of protection and instantly killing the Asari holding that point. The impact was so severe that she didn’t have time to scream before succumbing to her fatal injuries. Now, they were standing out in the open like prey to a pack of hungry Varren. A mixture of wails of agony from both Humans and Batarians could be heard as the bullets ripped apart their kinetic shields and armor, turning their flesh into pulpy masses. Another missile from the mech!

Bray noticed it heading towards Myxan. “Look out!” He yelled to her as she had her attention on three soldiers heading her way. He raced to pull her out of harm’s way but was too late. The blast tore apart her lower limbs and sent the rest of her body flying off the bridge and into the depths of the station. The distraction allowed a bullet to graze the side of his face. He was lucky that it was a few centimeters off from making an instant death shot, but it did cause a laceration near his right eyes. Blood began to drip down his face.

Half of his forces were already depleted, and it looked like they didn’t make a dent against Cerberus. In the distance, he noticed Aria, and her team heading his way. Krysta was right by her side. She was alive! This gave him new hope and energy. “Keep firing!” He yelled to his team. “Aria is here!”

Aria’s approach did deter a good portion of the forces away from them, but the mechs didn’t flinch. He knew that they couldn’t take another shot. Just as he thought he was facing his end, a satisfying shrill of joy was heard from behind. “Online!” The Salarian tech called to him. The canons rose up from their positions and began to open fire. The new assault caught Cerberus off-guard and their mechs didn’t stand a chance. The large armored monstrosities shook violently as the large rounds cut through their structure till finally they exploded taking out nearby forces in the process. The unsuspecting soldiers who lacked the heavy thick armor had the more gruesome demise. The rounds severed their upper arms and cut torsos in half. Carnage befell the bridge. Once they were certain that their opposition was dead, the canons stopped and lowered back once again in their idle state.

“Get inside the bunker!” Aria retook her command. Now was not the time for celebrations. An easy way to get killed.

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Once inside, Krysta moved over to Bray who was sitting on a crate box, nursing his head wound. He managed to scrounge up a medigel kit. He cursed silently as he tried to clean the scrape first before checking out his arm. “Is it bad?” Krysta watched on. Her face portrayed inner turmoil of professionalism and sincerity.

“Heh. I’ll live.” Bray finally gave a glance to his arm to examine it.

Krysta surprisingly moved his hand away to tend to it. “You need to put something on it before it gets infected. It needs to be sewn up.” She moved towards the kit to see what Omega had to offer. Luckily, she found some antibiotic ointment and a closing apparatus. Technology in the medical field advanced considerably after the twenty-first century. Hand stitching wounds was replaced by a handheld device for the more minor to moderate closures.
Bray grunted a little as he felt his arm throbbing as he gingerly removed his upper armor to give her clear room to work. Within minutes, Krysta managed to close the wound and heard him wince slightly in pain. Giving an approving nod, he smiled again at her. “Thank you.”

“Is the touching moment over?” Aria interrupted their private conversation. Her voice oozing with disgust.

“We want to keep every available man still alive. You have seen the hell we have endured so far, and we are only at the first layer,” Krysta rebutted.

Aria tilted her head in confusion. She obviously didn’t catch the human meaning referencing to an old poem by Dante. Bray didn’t know either. His brown eyes caught Nyreen’s appearance. He was surprised to see the female Turian standing there after all these years. He knew she and Aria went back, but they had a very bad falling out and supposedly the ex-lover left Omega. “What is she doing here?” He snapped to his boss in her defense. Now was not the time open old wounds that never really healed.

“Nyreen is fighting against Cerberus and like Shepard said.” A beat. “We need all the manpower we can muster.”

“Hello, Bray.” Nyreen tossed him a smile in spite. “Good to see you too.” She then turned to Aria. “A word?”

“I’m not here to chit chat.” Aria shook her head.

“It’s about our next mission.”

“I’m in on this with Aria. If you have something to say, then you say it to me.” Krysta interjected.

Aria scowled. “You don’t get to make the rules here, Shepard. Don’t cross the line.” She motioned Nyreen to follow her away from the group.

Once they were gone, Bray shook his head as he placed his armor back on. “We don’t need her.”

“She’s a good shot.” Krysta tossed back lightly, reflecting upon Nyreen’s combat skills so far.

“She’s too soft.” Bray fetched his pack of cigarettes. Maybe he could squeeze in one break before they moved out. “You don’t know her.”

“Enlighten me.”

“Let’s just say, she’s not Aria. When it came down to it, she let her stupid honor get the better of her. She never wanted to get her hands dirty, but for a while, she did enjoy the creds.”

“Among other things.” Krysta casually added, rolling her eyes heartedly. She gave him a look. “Did you?”

“What?” Bray put the cigarette in his mouth as he went to light up.

“Get your hands dirty?” Her eyebrow lifted. Was she judging him?

“Sometimes you have to.” He took a puff and let the smoke exit through his nostrils. “You are the same, Shepard.” He pointed out, reminding her of her profile that he studied. He shoved his body off the crate and rolled his neck, cracking the bones, then went back to enjoying the rest of his cigarette.
“Bray.” Aria’s voice called to him nearby. She paused slightly to give him time to end his present conversation. “Keep an eye on her.”

He noticed Nyreen moving towards the back of the bunker. “I’m on it.” He gave Krysta a silent look before turning his new task.

“Where to now?”

“We find the Talons. Not my first choice, but they are all that I’ve got.” A beat. “Thanks to your war against the merc gangs a few years back.”

“Didn’t plan for that to happen.” Krysta fired back, thinking back to her recruitment of Archangel.

“Of course, you didn’t.” Aria was not buying it. “You never cease to interest me, Shepard. I must say that I almost gave up on you helping me.” Her arms crossed, smugly. “Bray did his job.”

“That wasn’t his job.” Krysta glared hard at her. “And what happened between us is not the reason why I’m here.”

T’Loak didn’t flinch from the raise in her voice. She remained neutral and calm. A smirk slowly spread across her glossy lips. “Really? Then tell me why.”

“I’m here because I need the forces to stop the Reapers. My focus is on that war, not Omega.” Shepard hissed lowly.

“Stop playing, Shepard. After I have retaken Omega, do you really think you won’t go after some Batarian ass again?” Her sudden crudeness was a bit shocking and at first Krysta wasn’t quite sure on how to respond. Her hesitation played into this even more. “Don’t kid yourself, Shepard. This is Omega. Sex is one of our top commodities…that and drugs. You really think I haven’t seen it all?”

Clenching her fist, Krysta fumed. She hated the place she was in right now. Aria knew how to make her feel uncomfortable and the torture was relentless. She was too deep in now to simply walk away to leave Aria and the others there to own devices. After all, she came in on her cruiser and that was destroyed. With Cerberus still ruling the station, she couldn’t call the Normandy to come for a pickup. She was stuck here with Aria and she had no choice but to stand there and bear what was given to her. She had one card up her sleeve still. “What about you and Nyreen?” She blurted out quickly. “What about your past?”

“Whatever was between us, it’s over. We both know that.” Aria tensed slightly, but not enough to really give it away.

“Is it?” Krysta prided.

“Careful, Shepard.” Aria’s voice lowered. “I was beginning to like you.”

**************

“Shepard? Is that you? How can…I can’t believe it!” A familiar young female voice broke through the crowd of Talons.

At first, Krysta couldn’t make out who it was, but as the merc neared, she recognized her to be Avery. She met her on the Citadel years ago when she was there trying to convince the council about Saren. Like her, Avery was from Earth. She was like the younger sister to Shepard that she never had. Her hair color was brown and long in a pony tail, her light blue eyes were looking right at her. No real changes from her first encounter other than the fact of having on a Talon uniform instead of civilian clothes. “Avery! What are you doing here?” She still wasn’t over the fact that this Earth girl was now part of the Talon merc group.
Avery greeted her with a hug and then moved away with the same beautiful smiling face. “I came to Omega a few months after Earth was attacked. The Citadel was too boring.”

“And your family?”

Avery grew silent and Krysta noticed tears glossing her eyes. She gently moved her hand to lightly touch her arm. “They…were not with me on the transport…I haven’t heard from them.”

“Avery…I’m sorry.” Her friend’s appearance reminded her of why she needed to get back to Earth. The more time the Reapers had, the more loved ones would be lost to the war of attrition.

“The refugee camp on the Citadel was just too boring. Reminded me too much of my family and my friends that I know perished. I couldn’t stay away. They were offering transports to Omega since that was one of the few places hit yet. I wanted to go there, to get away from the war…” A sour look filled her face. “I guess the war followed me here.”

“This is Cerberus’ doing. I’m tired of dealing with these assholes.” Krysta went back to her earlier question. “Why the Talons?”

“Hey, I can’t live off nothing. I had to get creds and dancing is not my forte. Heard the Talons were recruiting after the Suns, Eclipse and Blood Pack were hit hard from Archangel. The pay is well, and my life really wasn’t in danger…well until recently.”

“You’re on an Omega…your life is always in danger.” Shepard argued flatly. She thumbed over her shoulder towards where Nyreen stood talking with the rest of her gang. It was revealed to them that Nyreen was in fact the leader of the Talons and not Darius like Aria thought. “How is it working for her?”

“It’s better than it was with Darius when I first signed on. He was such an ass, but he was killed shortly after Cerberus took over. “I would trust Nyreen more with my life than with Aria. All she cares about is herself and her reign over this place.”

“I’ve noticed that.”

“I’m surprised that you were willing to help her.”

“The more I thought about it, the more I realized I didn’t have a choice.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Shepard. I never thought I would have the honor to run into you again.

“Honor?” Krysta chuckled. “I’m from Earth just like you. I’m just a soldier. That’s it.”

“No. You’re a Spectre and a damn good one at that.”

“Shepard, we’re ready to discuss plans.” Aria motioned her over.

Krysta looked back at her friend. “Stay safe out there.”

“You too.”

***************

After their briefing on their next missions, Krysta stayed behind at the outpost while watching Bray’s team grab gear and ammo. Avery was standing next to Bray, sifting through the open box of rounds. Her face filled with fear and anxiety and she noticed that her hands were shaking. Bray also took
notice, although the merc’s demeanor seem to irk him more than anything. Impatiently, he reached into the same box to shove a pack of ammo into her hand. “Get it together.”

Moving towards him, Krysta pulled his rifle away from the table, grabbing his attention. “She’s on your team?”

“Yeah. Nyreen wants some of her people to go with us down to the maintenance tunnels to scout them.”

The statement made Shepard uneasy. Even though she barely knew Avery other than passing a few times on the Citadel, she felt connected to her almost like family besides her crew. Other than them, she never really had a family while living on the streets on Earth when she was a child. “You better not let anything happen to her.” She shoved the rifle into his hands roughly.

“I can’t promise what we may find down there…hopefully nothing.”

“Just bring your ass back. This may be the last time I see you until we get rid of Petrovsky.”

“I will.” Bray grabbed her hand just as she was turning to head out with Aria’s team and pulled her close. He kissed her deeply. “Watch yourself out there.”
Chapter Summary

Bray and the others survey the maintenance tunnels on Omega. What will they find?

Avery copyrighted to rpgwarrior4824

Sh’sk copyrighted to me

Mass Effect Solace
Chapter 28

Sh’sk caught up alongside Bray as their team went deeper into the maintenance tunnels towards the center location of the station. So far, there was no sign of Cerberus lurking in the darkness or for that matter, adjutants. “Glad to see that you weren’t dead. Thought you were taken out earlier when you disappeared.” He eyed his longtime friend.

“Aria needed me elsewhere.” Bray chose his words carefully. He knew that Sh’sk was his friend, but sometimes, special privileges would often turn people amongst one another; especially on Omega. “I didn’t know it would take this long to get back.”

“Lost good men to the adjutants…had to shoot many myself.” Bray’s friend shook his head in disgust. “It was either that or risk letting them turn others.”

“How many are on this station?” The tiny hairs on his neck rose as a cold chill entered his body. He could almost feel the hot breath of the terrifying Reaper creatures breathing down on him in the tunnel.

“I have no idea. Rumors were that they went into the eezo mines down in the lower sections with their victims and are breeding. The mines went dark and not all of the workers are accounted for.”

The idea that Cerberus was simply ignoring this threat didn’t bode well with Bray. Either they were using the adjutants to maintain control of the station or were hoping that the attacks would arise after they departed. Even if Aria managed to get Petrovsky off the station, would she stand a chance against the creatures? “What are you guys chatting about up here?” Avery whispered behind them as she pushed through the group to make her way to the front. She didn’t know who this Bray guy was, but he was a close friend of Shepard’s and she felt safe knowing he was around. She wanted to stay close to his side should the fight turn ugly. She never really saw combat until Cerberus struck Omega and even then, it was hit or miss when it came to skirmishes. Fortunately for her, she was always to the back and never had to be on the front lines. She even lucked out when another group of Talons were slaughtered by the adjutants. One of her friends was killed in that ambush.

Bray and Sh’sk both took a glance back at Avery, then returned to their conversation. “Who is she?” Sh’sk gestured her way with his head.

“Friend of Shepard’s. She wants her safe.”
“Good luck on that.” Sh’sk looked back at Avery. “Ever fired that thing?”

“Yes.” Avery shot back defensively as she furrowed her brow. Her youthful appearance made people never take her seriously and it was really starting to piss her off.

Bray chuckled. “Did you ever hit anyone?”

Avery chewed her lip as she looked at him. “Once…maybe.” She sighed loudly in exasperation. “Geez, I don’t know!”

“Quiet!” A krogan barked at the end of the group. “You want to alert Cerberus?”

Avery cringed in embarrassment. “Sorry…” She whispered. She studied Bray closely and opened her mouth once more, “So, you dating Shepard now?”

Sh’sk chuckled at his friend. “You and the Spectre?”

Bray glared at him. “Shut up.”

“Aria approve of this?”

“Yes. It was her idea.”

“Yeah, till Omega is hers. You keep kissing Alliance ass like this and she’ll eject you off this rock afterwards.”

“I don’t support the Alliance.” Bray grumbled. Hearing machinery ahead, Bray held up his fist to motion for the others to stop and to be quiet. He listened again, trying to figure out what it was. It was hard to see too far in the tunnels. They had to go a little further and hope that they didn’t let whoever it was down there that they were onto them. Waving with the same hand, the group continued down the tunnel until they could barely see a clearing ahead where the center support structures were. Engineers were using grinders to gain access to the support columns and were placing explosive devices around the bases! With their intent undefined, Bray could pretty much figure out what they were planning to do. He had to risk in alerting Aria. He tapped his comm piece and then spoke, “Aria. This is Bray.”

“Go ahead.”

“Cerberus engineers are placing explosives on the central support columns.”

“I’m on my way there. Engage them.” The comm went dead again.

He raised his assault rifle and set his sights on the engineer that was the closest in range. “Light em’ up!” He squeezed the trigger to give the signal and the engineer didn’t have a chance to pop his kinetic barriers. The disruptor ammo shattered his armor and sent him reeling up against one of the columns.

Sh’sk picked off the second one while the pair of krogan behind them did the old fashion charge and pushed past the group. The alarmed Cerberus team still didn’t have a chance to entangle with a well-armed group in the tunnels. Luckily for Bray, they were completely caught off-guard.

Avery moved to the right to pick up a Cerberus soldier inbound. She fired with her own rifle and managed to nail him in the arm, but not enough to do any real damage. Several of her rounds missed and struck the nearby wall. “Damnit!” She tried to move her barrel over to compensate the trajectory, but she couldn’t get a clear shot and the soldier was moving in on her pretty fast. He raised his pistol
and manage to do some considerable damage to her own kinetic barriers. Ignoring the danger, Avery
kept trying to fire. Before she knew it, he was up on her! Alarmed, she stumbled back to quickly
distant herself. Suddenly, there was a blur and then the sound of a helmet cracking as Bray swung
his rifle like a club and nailed the soldier in the back of the head. Caught unaware, the soldier
groaned as he fell into unconsciousness. Panting hard to catch her breath and to allow herself to
regain her composure, Avery gaped down at the fallen soldier and then back at Bray with wide blue
eyes. “T-Thank you.”

“Don’t stand there next time and move your ass. You need to shoot better than this.” Bray turned to
rejoin the group. More of Cerberus forces were pouring into the tunnels, on full alert of what
happened to their team. One of the Salarian techs in Bray’s group was busy working on severing the
detonators from the columns. It seemed like their whole ordeal with Cerberus was buying time for
their techs. Aria had quite the handful on her payroll that were still alive on Omega.

“Surprise bitches!” Aria’s voice boomed from another part of the tunnels as she and Krysta’s squad
came rushing in with their weapons blasting to overpower the soldiers that were running in. Now the
numbers were turned in their favor. The Asari launched a powerful biotic shockwave attack that
slammed several of the troops into the concrete walls. Krysta and the Nyreen helped them make short
work of the others. Once they were in the clear, Aria didn’t wait around for reunions. Her mind was
focused. “On to Afterlife. Bray, keep these pests back. I don’t want their fowl stench near me.”

“You got it.”

Krysta gave a silent look to Bray and Avery before she turned to move on. They seemed to be faring
well so far. They were so close to the end. What could wrong now?
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

The fight with Omega comes to a close. Is there a darker side to Krysta Shepard?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 29

“Move! Get out of the fucking way!” Bray shoved his way through the crowd of non-combative residents of Omega that took refuge in the markets. His path from the maintenance tunnels let him straight towards the markets before reaching the night club. Dead bodies were scattered about: Some Cerberus, but mostly the people of Omega. Their corpses riddled with bullet wounds. A battle must have taken place there at some point while he was away and clearly, Cerberus was the winner. Intense gunfire was heard in the nearby neighborhoods indicating that the fight shifted away.

“Get your ass out of the way!” Sh’sk sidestepped around a large Elcor as he and the others followed Bray.

Avery had trouble navigated like the others since her smaller frame didn’t seem as threatening. “Ugh! Come on, now!” She groaned in frustration as she tried to look for another route. She was losing sight of the others.

“The word is clear, my friends! Blood alone will not purify us. The end is upon us!” The resident Batarian prophet had a large following in the center of the markets, which was the main factor of the gridlock. The multitude were on their knees, wringing their hands, sobbing and praying to whatever deity they chose.

Finally, they made it to the streets just outside Afterlife and into a large Cerberus group that was tasked to hold back any reinforcements of Aria’s. “There they are!” One of the soldiers alerted his team as he opened fire.

“Get out of the way!” Bray yelled as he dove behind a column as Sh’sk and Avery took behind a deserted merchant’s cart. A fellow Salarian was not so quick and panicked to find cover, to only find himself taking the blunt of the gunfire. Bullets pierced his slim body, hitting his head and exploding it.

Sh’sk rose up and squeezed the trigger, nailing one soldier square in the chest. He stumbled and fell back. Avery took on the second and was proud knowing that this time, she made her shots count.

Bray joined in and managed to snag a third. Their Krogan teammate grabbed the fourth and crushed his skull with his bare hands. Seeing that the coast was clear, Bray moved out and scanned the area. Where was Aria?

“She must have gone to the club already.” Sh’sk noted the same.

“Then we are going in.” He looked over at the Krogan. “Stay outside with Avery and kill whatever comes at us.”
Avery shook her head and moved to put herself between him and the club. “No way! I’m going in there with you.”

“No.” Bray motioned with Sh’sk to take his side. “I have no idea what to find. Petrovsky is not an idiot and it wouldn’t be this easy.”

“Aria and Sheppard are in there. We stand a chance.” Avery persisted, planting her feet firmly on the ground. If her friend was in trouble inside, she wanted to help her.

The Krogan growled in her defiance, becoming agitated. He stomped over, lifting her up roughly and moving over to reopen the path. “Out of the way, Human.”

Avery kicked her feet as she wiggled to free herself from his grasp. “Hey, stop!”

“It’s for your own damn good.” Bray reminded her firmly. He was about to move ahead when an eerie gurgling noise came around the corner. The frightening glowing blue eyes of two adjutants came into view as their grotesque form lurched in. Their abnormal long arms draped, their claws nearly scraped the street floor. Oozing blue fluid seeped out of their mouths as they approached. “Shit…”

“Now it gets fun.” Sh’sk tensed up beside him. He nervously glanced over at their Krogan companion, hoping that he wouldn’t be reckless and charge at these two. Proximity was not ideal at all.

“Ideas?” Avery stepped closer to Bray as she felt her heart racing. She never had to go toe to toe with adjutants yet and these creatures were more terrifying that she could imagine!

“Mags?” Bray looked over at Sh’sk.

“Last one.” Sh’sk informed him as he checked his clip.

“Half.” Bray muttered. The adjutants would take a lot of firepower and probably more than they had.

“Eat this!” The Krogan chucked a grenade towards the Reaper forces, exploding upon impact, only to piss off the adjutants and not causing any real effective damage. The satisfying smirk on the Krogan’s face dissipated when he realized that his foes were still standing. Their howls and snarls confirming their anger. Quickly, both leaped to gain ground between themselves and the Krogan. Bray pulled the trigger on his assault rifle to hit the one on the left, knocking him off course and onto the ground, while Sh’sk hit the one on the right. The second one got up quicker and moved to take down Sh’sk. The Batarian tried to put more distance between them, but he knew he was not quick enough. He winced and waited for the end to come. Instead, there was sound of gunfire and the shriek of the adjutant in pain. He slowly opened one set of eyes to see the bloody corpse on the ground and Avery standing beside him. Her breathing was rapid, and her hands were shaking on her gun.

Sh’sk gaped at her in shock. “T-thank you…” He stumbled to find his words.

“It’s alright.” She said in between breaths.

“Focus on the bastard!” Bray returned their attention to the final adjutant. Within seconds, they were able to take him down as well since his thick hind still couldn’t save him from the assault of four guns. Panting to catch his breath and regain his composure, Bray looked at his team. “That should be all of them…”

A third adjutant appeared around the corner. The Krogan chuckled. “That’s what you think.”
“Did you really have to say that?” Sh’sk groaned.

Before the adjutant had a chance to move in, it’s entire body exploded from a strike to its rear. Blue ooze flew everywhere covering the street. Once the carcass fell, their line of sight was clear and there behind where the adjutant once stood was Harot, the Elcor, outfitted with a large weapon on its back. His beady eyes stared at the four as its trunk like arms stood proudly before them. Smoke still smoldered from his cigar as he almost seemed to smile. “Annoyed. Those things are messing up my business. Urgently. Please control this situation.”

“Now, I’ve seen it all.” Bray chuckled a little from the comic relief. He almost forgot the task at hand. Aria! “Shit...” They lost time in fighting the adjutants and he didn’t know for sure what was going on inside the club.

“Cease and decease all aggression. It’s over.” Petrovsky’s voice boomed through the PA system, answering the questions that filled his head.

“Stay here.” Bray told Sh’sk and the others as he raced inside to check on things. Could it truly be over?

Krysta Shepard stood silent in the background as she watched Aria T’ Loak choking Petrovsky. The look of murderous intent on her face. Shepard didn’t blame her. He was the reason why she lost the station in the first place; he was the one that made her make the hard choice in persuading Shepard to shut down the reactor to kill life support systems for several of the levels on the station, and he was the one who created the adjutants that led to the death of many people including Anto and Nyreen. He was the face of Cerberus right now and the Illusive Man even though he was only going by orders. Petrovsky tried to reach out to Shepard to beg for his life, offering what knowledge of Cerberus he had to bring them down in exchange for his asylum. When it came down to it, loyalty didn’t mean shit when he was about to lose his life. A part of her wanted to chime in and reach out to whatever good side Aria had and agree to his offer, but then again, she secretly enjoy the show before her. The man’s body wiggled as he squirmed on the control panel table to gain some seconds of life. Bray came up to their platform and looked on with great interest. He lifted an eye ridge at Shepard as if he was wondering what end Aria had for him.

Thinking back to the war and the reason why she was here, Shepard knew that the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the few or the one, so she had to put aside her own wants and desires and loathe what she asked of next. “Aria, let him go.”

Aria looked back at her, but held her firm grip around the man’s throat. She was displeased, but in the end, she knew Shepard was probably right on this one and for the most part, Shepard did what she asked on this station, which surprised her. For once, she would give this to her. “I’m only going to let you live, Oleg, because my partner needs your assistance to take down your Illusive Man.” She hissed through her gritted teeth. Her purple fingertips lingered on his flesh for a few more seconds, before she finally let him go. The man reached to his throat quickly to regain his breath and staggered to the ground, coughing. “Just get this filth off my station.” Aria wouldn’t look at him any further.

Assured that his life was no longer in danger, Oleg slowly rose up and looked at Krysta with the best professional face he could give despite his beaten down appearance. “Shepard, I’m at yours to command. My files will be transmitted to the Alliance once I have safe passage off this station. You have my word.”

“You better not make me regret this.” Krysta spat at him.
Oleg eyed her carefully before squaring his shoulders back in a calmer military posture. “I must say that I’m truly am surprised by you, Shepard. Then again, the element of surprise is key when it comes to defeating your opponents.”

“What does that mean?”

“Your military background is very impressive. Especially when it came to how you held your ground on Torfan against the aliens.”

Krysta knew where he was jabbing at it with this. She knew she lost her entire unit to Batarian pirates on Torfan and was the sole survivor. She massacred the remainder of the Batarian forces on her own before she was able to get rescued. Sure, some of her actions were ruthless, but that’s what it took to get the job done. “You mean the Batarians?” She corrected him as her eyes narrowed. “We were at war then.”

“And yet after what all they did, you seem to side with their kind now.” Oleg motioned to Bray. “Has Aria rubbed off on you that much?”

“She has actually rubbed off on me, Petrovsky. If she didn’t, you would not be standing here talking to us.” Aria interjected coolly. She shook her head at Bray, motioning him to keep his mouth shut. Bray remained tight lip as best as he could, and he noticed Avery standing down in the stairwell, trying to listen in on the conversation. He moved over to keep her from going any further.

“I can handle my enemies, Oleg.” Krysta hissed back at the brash man. “I’m at war now with Cerberus. That would make you the enemy. What do you think I could do to you?”

Oleg’s eyes widened, and his sureness fell off him once more. “You would not do such a thing, Commander. I’m a prisoner now and by Alliance code, you are to escort me to your superiors.”

Krysta smirked as she lifted her pistol and eyed the end of it gleefully. “See, that’s one thing you forgot, Oleg. This is not an Alliance mission. This is Omega.” She raised her pistol and shot him in the head, point blank. Blood and brain matter splattered all over the control panels and on the carpet.

Avery covered her scream with her mouth, but it wasn’t enough to stifle the complete sound of fright. All eyes turned to where she stood. The blood drained from her face as she looked at Krysta in disbelief. “How long have you been standing there?” Krysta asked her sharply.

“I-I just came up.” Avery stumbled up a little more and covered her face to keep from seeing Oleg’s bloody, headless corpse.

Aria chortled as she beamed proudly at Shepard. “You surprise me even more, Krysta. You are becoming more badass than me.”

“That bastard deserved it. I’ll still see if we can access his files.” Krysta holstered her pistol as she looked down at the general’s body in disgust.

“My team will do the same.” Aria’s vision panned over to Bray. “Take care of that mess.”

Bray didn’t even look at Krysta as he moved to carry out the order. The dead body really didn’t faze him. After spending half his life span on the station, dead bodies were almost the norm and he had seen some in far worse condition. He was shocked as what Krysta did. He almost believed that she was going to send him to the Alliance as a prisoner of war to gain knowledge. After all, the Reaper War was her priority and her focus for several years now. Her action was completely like Aria.
“Don’t forget your part of the bargain.” Krysta firmly reminded her Asari partner.

“I haven’t forgotten.” Aria snapped in irritation. “My ships and eezo caches are yours.” Her deep blue eyes moved over to the control panel and a slow smile of satisfaction spread across her purple lips. “I have a station to handle now.”

“One more thing.” Krysta added as she looked on.

“What is it?”

“Bray comes with me.”

Bray nearly dropped the dead man’s body when he heard the request. He paused in his steps and looked at Aria for her order. His heart began to race. He didn’t expect Krysta to demand of this. He never thought he would leave Omega again, but that was until Krysta came into his life. He wanted to be with her and she could see how well he held his own. She needed someone like him. Perhaps if he came, then his friend, Sh’sk, could join in too. “That wasn’t part of the deal.” Aria shook her head. “I’m too short on man power. Bray works for me and he is needed here. Once your little war is over, you are more than welcome to come back to Omega. I’ll even buy you a drink.”

“You don’t own him. He’s a damn good fighter.” Krysta wasn’t about to give this up.

“I don’t have time to argue about this. I have a station to run. He will escort you back. I’m sure you have a war to get back to.” Aria moved over to the control panel. The very ideal of asking him to join her really irked T’ Loak. Krysta began to wonder if perhaps deep down, she was jealous?

Bray dropped Oleg’s body and moved to exit the club with Shepard. Avery was now nowhere to be seen and he began to wonder where she went. Krysta seemed to be troubled about the same. “I didn’t know she was there. She’s too young for this shit.”

“Omega will toughen her out.” Bray commented nonchalantly as he walked beside her towards the outside of the club. After several minutes of silence between the two and the only sound was Aria giving her victory speech to her subjects, Bray finally uttered, “You know I can’t go with you.”

“She doesn’t control you, Bray. Grow a pair, damnit.” Krysta snapped harshly. Inside, she knew her tone was colder than she intended. Reality was settling in and she knew that it was back to the grind and away from this place and him, maybe for good. She had no idea what was in store for her next. The end game was drawing closer. There was a strong possibility that she already accepted that after the war, she may not be coming back to Omega and not by her choosing.

“Omega needs me here just like Earth needs you out there. This is my home.” Bray remained calm, trying his best not to send to set their goodbyes on bad terms. “Aria seems to always get what she wants.” Krysta sighed heavily in defeat. She was worn out. It seemed like she could never get a break from battle. Her body was long overdue for a hot bath. She wasn’t quite ready to say goodbye to Bray, but she couldn’t find the words. A lump formed in her throat.

“You and I both know that this will hurt Cerberus. You need that right now. You said it yourself.” Bray reminded her gently.

Krysta couldn’t hold it in any longer. She finally snapped. Pivoting on her heel, she spun to meet him, grabbing his arm to stop him dead in his tracks. Her fingers tightly around his wrist. “Damnit, Bray. The Reapers are on Earth right now. Ships are great for supplies and assaults, but I need troops on the ground. I’m fucking tired of everyone being so damn greedy and holding back. You really
think Omega is safe? Aria can’t go up against them…I don’t care how powerful of a biotic she really is. Adjutants are a walk in a park compared to Harbinger. The Reapers won’t just stop on Earth or Palaven. They obliterated Khar ’Shaan. Millions of Batarians are dead or either cannibals. I have fought them…” Her voice cracked. “I…” Biting her tongue, she couldn’t make herself admit that she dreaded the notion of Bray being indoctrinated into one of those vile creatures. Fighting adjutants was bad enough. What if the Reapers hit Omega while she was gone? She couldn’t do anything about it. The war was hitting on all fronts and there was only one of her.

Bray remained quiet, calculative until he tilted his head in the gesture of offense in Batarian culture. He was starting to speculate if the whole reason why Shepard even bothered to help was to scheme in getting him to come along with her. Bray didn’t mind the idea of the request since their relationship did escalate to a new level right before the mission, but he still felt connected to Omega, just like Aria. Was she just as selfish and greedy as T’Loak? He thought back to the way she handled Petrovsky. He never really seen this side of her. For a moment, it almost scared him. More than Avery. She seemed so dark. Was the war finally breaking her or was it Aria’s influence? “You only did this to get me on your ship.” Bray acknowledged what he was thinking. His tone grew colder. “Hah, I never thought you would be like Aria.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Krysta withdrew her hand and placed a few feet between them. She didn’t like his accusations.

“I’m not an item to be traded for.” Bray continued further. “If you wanted me to join, you should have fucking asked.”

“Well, why does it matter now? You spoke your mind.” Krysta stormed towards the dock where the transport was waiting to take her back to the Normandy rendezvous point. “I had it with this station.” Bray cursed under his breath as he watched her walk away from him. He finally got his feet to move and he was up at her within seconds. “Shepard, wait.”

“I have a ship to get back to.” Krysta avoided any eye contact.

“Damnit, Krysta.” Bray grabbed her hand just as they reached the transport docking entrance. “Look at me.” Her fiery composure almost shook him to his core. He could almost feel his knees wobble as her brown eyes met his once more. “You better bring your ass back here once this is over.” He gently took her hand and lightly squeezed it.

His touch softened her, and she couldn’t help, but to smile at him. Laughing lightly, she squeezed his hand back. “Why are you doing this to me, Bray?”

“What’s that?”

“Make me want to tear you apart one minute and then want to kiss you the next?”

He shrugged playfully. “I guess that’s my Batarian nature.”

She eyed the transport sadly and looked at him. “You know once I get back on that thing, there’s no guarantee that I’m coming back.”

“How can I give you solace then?” He smiled warmly at her.

Krysta smirked. “I didn’t know Batarians knew how to smile.”

“Only if we want something.” He churred playfully as he drew her closer.
Feeling the warmth of his body pressed against her made her ache for him once more. She wanted a few days to just lay in his arms, but she risked too much time as it was. It was time to remain focused. She wouldn’t leave Omega empty handed, but not quite what she wanted. She was not coming back with everyone she wanted to or intended to have. She wouldn’t break the rules by having a Batarian squadmate. The idea was very taboo especially after the Hegemony pledged a war against the Humans before their homeworld was destroyed. Beggars couldn’t be choosers. “If you change your mind, my offer still stands.” She kissed him deeply.

“I’ll make note of it.” Bray returned the kiss with equal passion. Their lips locked together until finally they broke for air. “You better come back to me.”

“I will. You better believe it.” She paused in her tracks and looked off at the skyline of the station behind him. “If you find Avery, have a talk with her. I wish I got a chance before I left.”

“I’ll find her.”

Shepard sighed and gave him another quick kiss before pulling herself away and entering the transport. She couldn’t bear to look at him anymore. The more she lingered, the more a part of her wanting to stay there and say the hell to the Reapers. That wasn’t her. That could never be her. She never regretted the paths she taken, but for once, she almost did.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Shepard seems to not meet eye to eye with Javik. The Illusive Man has plans for Shepard's interference.

Yawning, Krysta paused outside the room that their Prothean squad mate took over on the Normandy. Their last mission with Legion that led to her plugging herself into their consensus was mentally exhausting. However, the task was needed if they wanted to help the Quarians finally retake their homeworld without a complete massacre to the Flotilla. As soon as she was back onboard, she was summoned by Javik to see him immediately. Treynor seemed a bit uneasy and didn’t have a lot of details about the request. With very little information regarding their species, the entire staff seemed to be on red alert already for their Prothean resident. Taking a breath, Krysta stood straighter and entered. Javik was standing in the center of the room, looking right at her with all his eyes. His expression filled with anger and turmoil and his posture was on guard as if he expected her so quickly. “You wanted to speak with me, Javik?” Shepard started their conversation.

“Commander, I heard you interfaced with the Geth. How can you be so gullible in falling for that? You never trust machines. The Reapers would have had you.” He shot out, his emotions running high. His voice elevated.

“I trust Legion.” Krysta sharply reminded him. “I trust him more than I do you, right now.” She didn’t like the idea of this alien questioning her choices she made. Her squadmates were uneasy about her plugging in, but they accepted her decision and it wasn’t like they didn’t trust Legion. Garrus fought along Legion in the war against the Collectors. The concept of interfacing with an AI made everyone feel nervous. She wasn’t too keen on the idea herself, but she didn’t really have a choice. She had to go forward if it meant helping the Quarians and obtaining their fleet in the war against the Reapers. She just hoped that they would come through their part of the deal once they took back Rannoch. With Tali on the admiralty board, she would have some pull in what they decide.

“Do not be foolish!” Javik yelled back. “In my cycle, the synthetics turned against the organics. The only option you have for this Legion is to space it.”

“When your cycle has ended. Legion stays as a part of my crew and he is welcome here,” Shepard hissed at him through gritted teeth. She could feel her fists clenching as she defended her old squadmate. “Maybe that’s the reason why you are the only one left your kind. You didn’t trust others. You stuck to yourselves.” Javik narrowed his eyes and remained silent at her statement. Her own words struck a chord with her as well. She remembered years ago on her own mind set. She was very pro-human and didn’t like the idea of working with aliens. Though, if she didn’t listen to Anderson and use their aid, she would have never been able stop Saren. The Citadel would have been destroyed by Sovereign and millions of humans in the Traverse and on the Citadel could be husks right now. Mindless slaves to the Reapers’ will. She had to change for the good and it opened her mind to new
experiences. Speaking with Javik right there in that spot, almost felt like she was arguing with her old self.

“I have voiced my concern, Commander. Is that all?” Javik turned away from her to move towards another part of the room. She was losing rapport with him and maybe right now, she just needed him to cool down and brood a little. Arguing with him only seemed to add fuel to the fire.

Offended that she was for once being dismissed, Shepard quickly left the room. A part of her wanted to tell him to pack whatever belongings he had and leave her ship, but she knew that he was very skilled in combat and she needed him. With her head down, she failed to see Liara walking in her direction and bumped hard into her, nearly knocking down the Asari onto the cold metal floor.Grabbing her friend’s hand to keep her from falling, Shepard’s face turned red in embarrassment. “Sorry, Liara,” she mumbled.

“That bad is it?” Liara already pinpointed out on where she went. Word spread fast around the ship and Javik had a challenging time adjusting as it was.

“Javik just pisses me off sometimes. I always thought the Protheans would be less…prejudiced.” Krysta shot her brown eyes angrily back at where she came from. She fought back the urge to go back in there and give him a piece of her mind.

“I must say that I was floored as well, but he does give me some insight about their history. He is…fascinating.” Liara’s soft voice seemed to soothe her and quench her anger.

“Another artifact to study. Huh, Liara?” Krysta teased. “Just like Therum.”

“By the Goddess, it’s not like that…” Liara’s deep blue eyes grew wide and her cheeks grew red.

“Well, if you can calm him down, then, talk to him. I just need the rest of the night to myself.” Krysta yawned again. “Just how long do Protheans actually live? I mean, how old is Javik, anyway?”

Liara gave a shrug. “I’m not quite sure…their records never really spoke about their lifespans. Another question I will need to ask him.”

“You writing a book, Liara?”

Liara grinned. “When this is over, I may.” Her smile quickly disappeared as another question popped up. “You ready to hit Rannoch tomorrow?”

“It’s been long overdue to the Quarians. I just hope they and the Geth can make peace somehow and co-exist.”

“After all they have been through, I don’t think the Quarians will.” Liara shook her head. “I remember listening to Tali’s stories when I first came onboard. I can’t imagine being exiled from Thessia and having to live on a ship for the rest of my years. Asari live for a very long time.”

“If I can change Tali’s mind about working with Legion, then I have a shot. This war has changed all of us.”

“Even Javik?” Liara reminded her playfully of their troubled friend.

“Okay. Not all of us.” Krysta groaned as she rubbed her tired eyes. “With the Quarians’ fleet, we may stand more of a chance.” She paused, thinking back to her conversation with Bray on Omega when she asked for him to join her. Aria gave her all her ships that she promised, but Krysta wanted Bray to come with her. Krysta tried to argue that ships were not a necessity and they needed boots on
Earth. Now, it seems that she was wrong in that statement.

Liara noticed the frown that moved across her lips. “Shepard? Something wrong?”

There had been no word from Omega since she left there to return her focus back on the war. Was it truly over between her and Bray? Would he wait for her return? Would she even come back?

“Yeah…just reminiscing over past conversations. Night, Liara. See you at 0900.”

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Nodding his head at the bottle of brandy that his female servant was brandishing in front of him, the Illusive Man sat there and watched her pour him a glass of the dark liquid that he loved before setting the bottle down on the table next to him. She then quickly exited the room, awaiting her next moment to be summoned. Picking up the glass, he swirled the liquor around before drinking it. His eyes fixed on the view port in front of him. A large star was about to go super nova and the hours before the cataclysmic event was beautiful to him. Life thriving before a reaction and then disappearing altogether. An event that ran parallel to his own core principle. Humanity was thriving and going beyond their limitations despite the other races’ arguments. The Reapers were the reaction and he wasn’t about to let his entire species, his legacy, fade to black. A datapad next to his glass contained documents that he already scanned over several times. One contained the last report from Petrovsky on Omega before his life was quickly ended and the other was a message from Aria. This time no snide video chat from her. Instead, a few sentences reminding him of who was in charge and how she was going to make him pay for what he did to her. He ignored the latter. Aria was no threat to him, at least, not right now. He still had agents on the station right under her nose, so reports were constantly still coming in. Oleg’s report was the most disturbing. He reported losing his hold on the station and debated on whether to request reinforcements or not. That wasn’t his style, but desperation was pouring into his thoughts and words. Another report flashed on the screen. Oleg’s body was found in an abandoned Cerberus vessel that drifted out of Omega’s orbit after the rebellion. A gunshot to the head at point blank. He suspected Aria killed him but knew that Shepard had some part to play. One of Oleg’s reports before his untimely death mentioned Shepard helping Aria. The general was dutiful to the end. He never lost his patience when it came to orders and never appeared to be rattled. Even the amidst of hell, he seemed calm and collective. Cerberus needed more top officers like him. The Illusive Man needed more men like Oleg Petrovsky.

Pouring him another glass of brandy, the Illusive Man kept his eyes on the vid screen. His investment into Shepard was a huge undertaking for his organization. An ambitious failure. Some projects that went under could be swept easily underneath a rug and pretend it never happened. Not Shepard. She cost him billions and he completely lost her support. Her interference in with his plans was costing him millions still. Invaluable data had been compromised.

In his youth, he enjoyed a good game of cards from time to time and always made sure not to show his hand too soon. Right now, he had a few good cards to play and he wasn’t about to fold. Despite what happened on the station, the agents on Omega were still loyal to the cause. A few were right under Aria’s nose when she obtained support from the Talon mercenaries. One reported of a Talon merc by the name of Avery who seemed to have some sort of history with Krysta Shepard. The two really connected. Then there was the disturbing report that Krysta had close ties with Aria’s organization and was having a relationship with one of her top men on her payroll: A Batarian named Bray. The news was unsettling and completely disappointing. He thought back to the request that Miranda Lawson made while serving under him on the Lazarus Project. She tossed around the idea of placing a control chip in Shepard’s brain. The Illusive Man declined the request. He believed keeping Krysta fully intact and unaltered was the best route to gain her support and focus their strengths on humanity’s goals. Lawson was another lost agent of his and a great asset to the company. Shepard’s influence made Miranda have second thoughts of her loyalty and she turned her back once the Collectors were dealt with. He could have sent assassins after her, but Miranda was smart and made herself go off the grid. She was untouchable.
Time now was of the essence and Shepard’s constant interference could not happen anymore. He had to put plans in motion now while her attention was set elsewhere. Reports came in from the Alliance hacks that the Normandy was at Rannoch, the Quarian homeworld. This gave him time to plot. A distraction was needed and who else was better at causing one than his top agent.

As if he could read his mind, Kai Leng entered the room quietly from behind and took his place behind the Illusive Man’s chair. “Kai Leng…” The Illusive Man turned off the vid screen. “Lights at sixty percent.” The room’s control computer adjusted accordingly. “I’m sending you back to Omega.”

“What’s left of there?” Kai Leng asked. The Illusive Man knew that his trained assassin had his fair share of the station. He was there several times when they tracked down Grayson and Kai Leng knew about the recent events that had befallen Petrovsky. Omega was now a viper pit when it came to Cerberus agents and T’Loak would not fall for their ruse once more. The Illusive Man never trusted Aria herself even when he made a partnership with her.

“You failed on the Citadel.” The Illusive Man reminded him. The Council was still alive. “Shepard’s interference can no longer continue.”

“I thought she was on Rannoch.” Kai Leng asked.

A point and the Illusive Man wouldn’t have put past him to not be up to speed on the current details. “Shepard and I have different goals, but our paths would soon run parallel with one another till they intersect once more. She believes the ultimate goal is to destroy the Reapers. I see a way to control them. We are not ready to that point, and Shepard is cutting my time. Once she’s done with Rannoch, she will strike again. I need to keep her away a little longer so I can implement phase two.”

“Understood. So, what’s on Omega?” Kai Leng asked again.

The Illusive Man brought up the holo screen to display two images: One of Avery and One of Bray. Our agents report that Avery could be useful to us. She was with the Talons when Aria took back the station, but she has left the gang since then and not has been heard from. She has a connection with Shepard. You are very influential. Perhaps, you could have her join our cause.”

“Right.” Kai Leng’s face scrunched when his eyes moved over to the holo of Bray after he studied Avery’s image long enough to lock it in his memory bank. “And the Batarian?” He tossed the question out in disgust.

The Illusive Man hesitated on his response. A part of him seemed sickened by even admitting to what he knew. “This is one of Aria’s top agents on her payroll. He has grown close to Shepard. Capture him…alive.” The Illusive Man knew that Kai Leng could be ruthless in acquisitions. He had to stress the condition that he wanted the Batarian in. A dead alien was no use to them.

“What about her?” Kai Leng motioned back over to the holo Avery. “What if she blows us off?”

“Disappointing…but capture as well.”

“When I’m leaving?”

“You’re already gone.”

“Got it.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Kai Leng goes to Omega to find Avery.

Avery copyrighted to rpgwarrior4824

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER: 31

Avery sat down the plate of dextro food in front of her female Turian customer before moving over to check on another group of patrons nearby. She didn’t hesitate to wait on a thank you from the avian like alien race. Most of them didn’t even bother to strike up a conversation with her, other than to place their order. No one was there to make friends on Omega and after realizing the type of woman Shepard had become, she longed for her friends on the Citadel. The wards on the Citadel were fast moving, but from time to time, she would get a friendly wave or a “nice day” from someone walking past her. After Aria retook Omega from Cerberus control, she looked for a new leader to take Nyreen’s place. Several candidates were nominated, but ultimately it ended up being Aria’s decision. She gained more control over the gangs and her choice was a male Turian who never really been with the Talons and was one of Aria’s. The pick was clearly biased, but no one really could dispute it. More alien races were joining the Talons and more humans were being cast aside. Avery didn’t wait around for the rift. Frustrated on how things were changing for the worse for her on Omega, she left the Talons and took up doing odd jobs for a bit before finally deciding on a quaint Salarian delicatessen in the one of the “nicer” sections of the station. Serving food was not all that bad and it was away from Afterlife. She never really had to worry about seeing Bray or any of his companions from the club. She appreciated the way he saved her but knew that after seeing how Shepard killed a man in cold blood, that he was not on her side. Shepard was gone, and she was another human. Aria didn’t appreciate what she did, and it seemed like Bray didn’t make an offer to point out all the help she was to them. The more she thought about all this, the more it sunk her into deep depression. Now, all she spent all her creds on rent, food and the rest to book passage back to the Citadel. She debated whether to pay for a transmission to be sent to one of her friends to ask for help but decided against it. This was her job and she was the one who put her in this mess. She couldn’t depend on Shepard anymore. Especially not after she learned that Shepard overloaded the reactor core, shutting off life support systems to several occupied sections of the station to route power to other areas to knock out barriers. Hundreds including a few people that she knew lost their lives suddenly without knowing it was coming. Aria made it clear that it was her decision as well and it was to regain control. She then tried to deflect any hostility towards that decision against Cerberus. She blamed the organization for putting the citizens of Omega in that situation. Krysta returned to her war, but was she really going after the Reapers to defeat them for humanity? Or was it more for the aliens? Just how influenced was she?

A brown-haired male around his thirties entered the delicatessen and sat down near the back. He had hazel color eyes and dressed to be some sort of the upper class for Omega. He was busy working on his omni tool when she walked up to get his order. “Hello. My name is Avery. I'll be your server. Have you been here before?”
“No.” The man replied as he gazed up at her. His face lit in an orange glow from the omni. “I don’t travel this way much. Just got in since the barricade was lifted. What’s good?”

Avery pulled out her mini datapad to pull up the few key menu items she was focused on. “We have great meals today. May I ask where you are from? Perhaps, I can find something to your liking.”

The man glanced around to observe nearby customers and then looked up at her. “Avery, get me what you think is great. Make it quick. We need to chat.”

His sudden change startled her, and she nearly dropped her mini pad. “How do you know me?” This man didn’t look familiar at all.

“Let’s just say…I’m a friend. Now, about that meal?”

“Right away.” Avery moved over to the kitchen to alert the cook but tried to look back at the man without drawing too much attention. Once placing the order into the terminal, she opted out for her break and moved back over. She would have ten minutes to chat with him. Learn what she could. Slipping down in the seat across from him, she stared at him once more. “Okay, I have a ten-minute break. You’re a friend, but I don’t know you.”

“You wouldn’t. I’m an old war buddy of Shepard’s. She and I were both in the Alliance.” Avery’s face flickered with trouble and Kai Leng caught it. It was exactly what he hoped for. He decided to further play into it. “She has changed.”

“If you’re with the Alliance, then how come you are not on Earth? How did you find out about me?” Avery pressed.

Kai Leng didn’t twitch. She was smart, he would give her that, but he had been in tougher situations than this. He anticipated every possible dialogue choice, so he was prepared. “Too a shot to my leg. They put me on medical leave. Transported me back to the Citadel. Patched up on Huerta. I’m due for a transport back to Earth in two days. Thought I would find you first. How I know about you is not necessary and I don’t have time to disclose the full details since you have…” He glanced down at his omni watch. “Seven minutes.”

The whole conversation was foreign to Avery. She decided to not quite trust this guy yet since she really didn’t know much about him. She had to play dumb and not disclose what she thought. What if this was a trick by Aria to make her trip up? “What do you think made her change?”

“‘She feels sorry for what she did on Aratoht…let’s just say…she has ‘Batarian influence.’” The man looked at her. “The name is Kyle. Second Lieutenant Kyle Fields. I was with Shepard until she took part in the N7 program, but we kept in contact. Last contact was right before she came here I think. She’s burnt-out and humanity is suffering. I didn’t think she would take so long on Omega to help out a pirate queen like Aria.” Kyle kept his voice lower. “She is spending too much time around the aliens and families are being killed. Before I go to Earth to accept my fate, I want to make her see the light. I owe her that much. She saved my ass before so now it’s my turn to save hers.”

Kyle’s story was very compelling, and Avery could the raw emotion in his eyes. He would risk his own life to come to her knowing he could be dragged before Aria for speaking ill of her. So, she wasn’t crazy in thinking something was wrong with Krysta! Kyle was right! They had to snap her out of her senses and save her from the dark path she was going down. “What do you think made her change?” She whispered.

Kyle glanced down at his watch again and made a face. “Your break is up.”
“No, wait!” Avery reached out, grabbed his wrist in haste. She bit her lip as she looked back at the kitchen and other patrons. No one was needing her, but if she got up, she would risk not speaking with him again. Maybe, this was her ticket out of here after all! “You said you were stationed at the Citadel, right?”


“Take me with you. I need to get off here. I want to help you. Please.”

Kyle smiled. “You would be doing me a huge favor, Avery. Of course. Follow me.”

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When they were closer to the transports and away from prying alien eyes, Kai Leng decided to press his luck and test her out. He paused in midstride and turned around to stop her. “Avery, wait.”

“What is it?”

The man sighed. “Look. I haven’t been honest with you. I couldn’t risk chancing it out in the open like that.”

“What do you mean, Kyle?” Avery’s voice shook as she took one step back to put more distance between them. She didn’t like how things were now changing. Omega was a dangerous spot and now she was practically alone with a man that she didn’t know, who clearly knew her.

“I still want you to help me with Shepard, but I need to tell you the whole story. You must promise me not to speak or run. Is that clear?” Kyle reached out and gently took her hand, giving it a light squeeze.

“Sure.”

“I’m no longer part of the Alliance. I’m now part of Cerberus.” He could see the fear that had stricken her face. He squeezed her hand again. “A different…branch if you will. A faction. Petrovsky’s experiments are something that I would never approve. We still want to help humanity, but not risk any harm to our own kind. A group of us are saving colonies that are attacked by the Reapers or bound to be. Save what we can. We don’t have the manpower, so we reached out to Shepard…she rejected our request.”

“Why…?”

“I identified myself as Cerberus. I didn’t want to lie her. Thousands are dying each day. Now Shepard is on Rannoch, a Quarian homeworld, to help the Quarians. I believe Shepard has been around Reaper technology too long. She’s starting to do the Reaper’s bidding.”

“What…?” Avery shook her head. “She cannot be controlled by them.”

“Not willingly!” Kyle corrected. “I think that’s the cause of this. This is why she’s not bothering to help us out, why she’s with other races. The Reapers want to divide us.”

“My God…what can I do?” Avery was dumbfounded on the news that was being relayed to her. Just how far gone was her friend? It all made perfect sense now! Guilt consumed her. She had to help Shepard now. She would come back to her senses. She knew of it! She would restore the prized Commander she knew and admired when she first met her on the Citadel.

“There’s a group of us near the outskirts warehouse district. You familiar with it?”

“Used to be Suns’ territory. Yeah, I know the place.”
“You need to lead her Batarian companion there.” Kai Leng instructed her. He couldn’t believe how easy this was. “We will handle him.”

Avery chewed her lip. “Are you going to hurt him?”

“No.” Kyle shook his head again. “We need him to show Shepard the error of her ways. The Batarian doesn’t care about her. He’s using her. Look what all she did for Aria. You don’t see the Batarian or anyone else giving two shits about Earth and humanity, do you?

“No. What a bastard.” Avery sighed hard. “Damnit. I can’t believe this.”

“Look. Just lead him there. I’ll handle the rest and then I’ll get you the transport to the Citadel. We’ll be gone before night. Just hurry.”

“I’ll see you soon.” Avery scurried off towards Afterlife. Her heart was pounding. She had to think of some way to get Bray to follow her. She had to think of something! She would make him pay for using Shepard. She had to make Krysta snap out of it!

Kai Leng grinned as he watched Avery’s form disappear in the crowd. He tapped his comm piece in his ear. “Phase One implemented. Standby.”

“We’re ready.”

“Don’t screw this up. I have my next place to go to. Keep her interested.” He severed the connection and then patched his frequency to the Illusive Man through the secure channel as he moved towards his own private transport that he already booked for. “It’s done.”

“She agreed?”

“Seems like it.”

“Good. Thessia won’t be easy. The Reapers are already hitting there.”

“I’ll find the catalyst.”

“I know you wanted to stay there, Leng. You are my most trusted operative. I need the catalyst if we are to control the Reapers.”

“I’ll contact you once I have secured the item. Leng out.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Avery makes good on her bargain with Cerberus. Will it be worth it at the end?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 32

“It’s been weeks, Bray. When are you going to give her up?” Aria’s melancholy voice grabbed Bray’s attention from his post. Her blue eyes glanced away from the Asari dancer that was in front of her.

“Hmm?” Bray snapped out of his own thoughts. His body was presently there in Afterlife, but his mind was far beyond the Omega Relay. There had been no word from Shep and no reports coming in about some grand battle yet. He began to worry. What if he was wrong in not taking her side? Sure, he could fight, but he knew she had a well-armed team with her. They had to be enough.

“Your moping really helps the morale.” Her sarcasm oozed off her purple glossy lips as she dismissed the dancer. “I can’t even fucking enjoy this place right now.” Aria repositioned herself on her couch and crossed her arms in annoyance. Sulking. Bray really wanted to admit that he made the wrong decision in staying there, but he knew when to keep his mouth shut. Especially around Aria when she was pissed.

His silence irked her more. “You had your fun and you got Omega back. You should be happy. Get over it. She probably wasn’t even that good,” she huffed.

“He just needs the right fun.” Sh’sk chimed in from the back as he walked up the stairs to be Bray’s replacement for the night. He gave a wink to his friend. “After my shift, I’ll go buy him a drink.”

“Go now.” Aria dismissed them both. “Get him drunk. Get him laid. I don’t care. I just want him out of my sight.” Sh’sk paused and she knew if he was thinking about whether he would get paid or not.

“My treat. You’re still on the clock.”

Sh’sk chuckled and moved Bray down the steps along with him. “You need to mope more often.”

Bray growled and shoved away from his friend. “I’m not fucking moping.”

“Yeah, you are. Never been with a human. Can’t be that good.” Sh’sk contemplated the idea and shook his head with a shudder. “What’s she like?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Bray reached into his pocket to retrieve his pack of cigarettes. Shaking the box, he retrieved a stick and placed it in his mouth. Sh’sk held out his lighter for him. “Thanks.” He grunted as he took a puff. He slowly inhaled the nicotine to allow the chemicals to relax him. As hard as he hated to admit it, Aria was right. He needed to get Shep out of his mind and move on. He hated to feel this way. It was unnatural to him. Foreign to his species.

Still, a voice in the back of his head nagged him at a subconscious level. “You should have gone with her,” It spoke.
He swatted it away with another puff from his cigarette and turned to his friend. “Where are we going?”

“I didn’t eat yet. Want to try that volus diner?”

“That stuff is shit.” Bray quickly shook his head. “He charges too much.”

“The meat shack?”

“Sounds good.”

“You always like that place.”

“And you always like the shitty places.”

Avery arrived at Afterlife earlier that day and was scoping the club out, waiting for her time to come. “Where the hell are you?” She was becoming anxious. She had no idea on how long her contact would wait for her and her desire to leave Omega was growing. She mulled over what Kyle relayed to her. Her premonitions were correct. Kyle made everything turn fact. Seeing Bray and Sh’sk exit the club, made her heart beat speeding up. This was it! Watching the pair made her become angry. They were laughing and talking amongst one another as they walked towards the lower streets. Stepping out of the shadows, she followed them slowly. She didn’t anticipate that Bray would not be alone when she lured him towards the warehouse. Any desperation on her part to get him alone would be suspicious. Sh’sk was a variable that she didn’t think about, but maybe Kyle did. The man seemed intelligent and he was part of a faction. He had military background, so he had to anticipate his enemy’s every move. She just prayed that his team could handle two Batarians. If they failed, then she was in serious trouble. She had to make sure she found an out should Sh’sk and Bray overcome their attackers.

So far, the Batarians had no idea that she was behind them. She couldn’t wait around much longer. They were going further and further away from the warehouse. The more distance she had between that place and here, the more likely something would go wrong. Taking a breath, she forced herself to quick her step to catch up to them. “Hey, guys!”

The two stopped and turned around to see her jogging up to them. She forced a smile on her face and a wave. Her appearance overall baffled them. “Avery? Where the hell have you been?” Bray was the first to ask.

“Ayer? Where the hell have you been?” Bray was the first to ask.

Avery felt hesitation growing in her chest. She didn’t anticipate on them knowing her current state of affairs, and that was stupidity on her part. Word traveled fast on Omega. “I…just needed to take a break. Dealing with a war was not what I planned on.” She forced herself to smile again as she inwardly took a breath. She had stay calm and her hands were jittering! She couldn’t botch this up now!

“Uh huh.” Bray nodded his head to wipe the sweat from his brow. “So, what did you want?”

Avery could feel herself breaking down. She was cracking! “I…uh…” She nervously eyed the two. She wanted to run away. No, she had to stay there! She could do this. “Shepard sent me. She’s on the station. I, uh, ran into her.”

Bray’s eyes widened by the news. “Where is she?” Longing filled his voice.

“Not too far from here actually. She, uh.” She looked at Sh’sk who was staring her down as if she
was being interrogated. “I’m not sure if I can trust him.” She decided to play on this and transfer her fearful emotions over to his friend.

Sh’sk blinked in confusion. “What the hell is this all about?”

“I trust him.” Bray shot a hard glance over at his friend. “Not a word to Aria or it will be my ass.”

“Yeah, yeah. Damn, Bray.” Sh’sk rolled his eyes.

Avery swore in her mind. She was hoping that this would make Bray turn him away. She still had to deal with Sh’sk. “She didn’t want a lot of attention since she really needed to get back. She said she had some urgent news. She’s down near the warehouses to make it discreet. I can take you there.”

“Go ahead.”

There was no sign of anyone at the warehouses besides the usual workers when Avery and the others arrived. She began to worry that she missed her chance and Kyle’s team left. Using her omni tool as a guide, she navigated around the bustling area until she reached their destination. It was an older warehouse near the back and unused at the moment. An Elcor tycoon originally owned it at one time, but his business went under, so he took his stock and left the station. Bray and Sh’sk didn’t seem troubled at all by their location. “It’s here.” Avery whispered as she motioned them inside the darkened warehouse.

Using the flashlight off her omni, she walked deeper towards the center of the warehouse. There was no sign of anyone! Her face faltered as she stopped finally. “Hello?” She called out to the darkness.

Bray strained his eyes to look around with the small light of her omni tool. “Shepard?”

Seconds later, the lights flickered on and a well-armed Cerberus team was circled around them! The group consisted of five soldiers and three dragoons. The dragoons unleashed their electrified whips that crackled loudly upon snapping out. In the middle stood a man with kinetic shields for protection. He was clearly a biotic vanguard class. He appeared to be in his mid to late thirties with coal black hair that was slicked back. His face was well shaven except for a goatee at the bottom. This guy looked nothing like Kyle! His dark eyes twinkled with evil intent. “Very good, Avery. You did your part very nicely.”

Bray and Sh’sk both reached for their rifles, but their weapons were quickly snatched out of their hands by the dragoons’ whips. The tips struck their hands creating a burning sensation on their hands. Their rifles clanging hard to the ground. The man grinned and shook his finger. “Nuh-uh. We can’t have you doing that.”

Bray spun around to confront Avery’s treachery and saw her slowly tiptoeing away from them to avoid any harm to her own. “What the hell are you doing with Cerberus?!” He fumed loudly.

“She fucking lied to us!” Sh’sk growled through his teeth.

“Why?!” Bray kept his focus on her.

Avery glared at him. “You hurt Shepard! You only used her to get Omega!”

“I did not!”

“I know you did! Kyle confirmed it! She needs to help her kind! I’m helping Earth!”

“Fuck, Earth!” Sh’sk snapped at her angrily. He spat at her feet. “This is Omega!”
“Who the hell is Kyle?!” Bray’s head was spinning by the sudden accusations and details that he was clueless about.

“The Illusive Man said one Batarian, Avery. Not two.” The man sighed a bit. “I guess we can find a place for him as well.” He signaled the dragoons ahead while the soldiers kept their weapons poised. “Take care of them.”

Bray and Sh’sk placed their backs against one another to help protect one another as they kept their fists up. They eyed the approaching dragoons. Their rifles were too far away to make a quick grab for them. Sh’sk clenched his muscles tighter. “Some shitty afternoon this is.”

“I have no idea what these fuckers are. Watch yourself.” Bray said through grated teeth.

“No shit. Run for it?” Sh’sk tossed back at him.

“If you see an opening, go for it.” Bray lurched forward and swung at the dragoon.

The silent agent jumped back and raised both of his arms then pulled them down quickly allowing the whips to come out at Bray in rapid succession. Bray jumped back just in time to avoid being struck. The electricity crackled violently as it struck the spot he was previously standing in. “Damnit!”

Sh’sk looked to his rear and saw several of the soldiers blocking their exit. “We can risk being shot at.”

“My armor may take a few hits.” Bray nodded his head. They both turned to run towards the exit, surprising the soldiers. Darting left and right, Bray tried to throw off the soldiers to avoid any direct contact. If he took a bullet in the arm or leg, it wouldn’t matter if he would make it.

Suddenly he heard a crack from behind and then horrific pain as one of the dragoons got him in the back with its whip. The electricity overloaded his barriers and cracked the plating on his armor. He heard Sh’sk cry out as one got him on the leg, dropping him down with a large thud. Stumbling to get his footing, Bray fought through the pain as beads of sweat drenched his face, his entire body was twitching from the electrical aftermath. He charged at the dragoon, pulled back his fist and struck him hard with an upper cut to his right. The dragoon groaned through its helmet as it stumbled back. Bray moved to deliver another blow but then felt the same horrific pain as another dragoon got the whip around his other arm. The direct touch on his left hand heightened the degree of pain and he collapsed to the ground, balling up in a fetal position as another dragoon struck him again on the side. His body violently convulsed.

Sh’sk got up and tried to limp, ignoring the pain his leg but a Cerberus soldier lifted his gun and shot him in the side, dropping him to the ground. The Cerberus agent in charge, turned to the offending soldier angrily. “Guns was the last option!”

The soldier lowered his rifle, but no apology was given. Avery held her breath as she watched what was taking place in front of her. Her hand covered her mouth in shock. Sh’sk was alive, but bleeding moderately through the gaping hole in his armor. Bray was barely conscious. Another direct blow from the dragoons could kill him. “I didn’t want this to happen….” She said quietly.

The man picked up on it. “Come, my dear. They are just Batarians. They would have done much worse to our kind if given the opportunity.” He signaled his men to retrieve his prizes for the Illusive Man. “Cerberus thanks you for the added bonus.”

“How are you going to get off the station with them?” Avery looked on curiously.
The man chuckled. “We have ways. Aria still doesn’t have the best security system. I’m sure she will be amused to know that Cerberus was able to infiltrate the station once again, undetected. I suggest you come with us.” He pulled up his omni tool to make a call to his boss. Seconds later, the holo image of the Illusive Man displayed for Avery to see. “It’s done. Avery was gracious enough to deliver two Batarians to us.”

The Illusive Man smiled and looked her way. “Cerberus thanks you for your patronage, Avery. Shepard will too.”

“I just want to help her and Earth. I owe it to my family.” Avery sadly replied to him. She never met or seen the Illusive Man before, but his presence was very alluring.

“What about the second Batarian that we collected, sir?” The man inquired.

The Illusive paused for a moment, contemplating Sh’sk’s fate. “Henry Lawson is having breakthroughs over at Sanctuary. In his latest report, he indicated that the variables for the data on the Batarians were slim. Perhaps, another test subject will help him improve that number, Jones.” A beat. “Good work out there.”

Jones bowed slightly with another smile. “For humanity, sir.” Turning off the omni, he looked back at Avery. “Let’s get you off Omega. It’s time to get Shepard back on our side.”
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Bray is tortured by Cerberus to bring Shepard to them.

As a fan of Bray, this was hard to write!

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 33

Anguish consumed her like a tsunami. The call to the Asari Councilor ended minutes ago, but her body was frozen in place. She failed her...she failed the Asari people...she failed Liara. All because Cerberus was two steps in front of her. They were always two steps ahead of her! She was getting sick of them and their constant interferences! She was so close! So damn close! If she managed to get the plans for the catalyst from the Prothean VI at the temple, then they would be in the final stages of their assault against the Reapers and take back Earth. She would not drive them back into dark space but rid the galaxies of their existence. That was her mission. Her soul purpose ever since the vision from the beacon on Eden Prime. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the rail that in was in front of her. Her blood boiled so bad. She felt so out of control lately. Was this what Krogan blood rage felt like?

“Shepard?” Garrus called to her from the entrance to the room. How long was he standing there?

“Yeah?” Krysta cupped her face. Exhaustion was overwhelming her. Hanging her head down between her hands, she didn’t bother to look his direction. How much longer would this war last? Was Javik right? She almost felt like investing in bunkers and riding this one out.

“You okay?” His voice softened as he stood there, dutiful as ever.

Krysta laughed tiresomely at the situation. “No, Garrus. Hell, I don’t know what I am right now. I just had a tough conversation with the Councilor. How would you tell someone that you failed and their entire homeworld was doomed? How do you even prepare for that?” She finally looked back at him with the dark circles that formed underneath her eyes from the lack of sleep. Her nightmares were increasing, and she fought to stay awake. Too many painful memories waited for her in her subconscious state. Faces, voices that she wanted to avoid right now. The loss of Legion on Rannoch was a fresh wound to her.

Garrus looked down at his talons and sighed as he shook his head. “I don’t even know if I can answer that, Commander. It was hard enough giving the retreat signal to some of my men on Menae. We all were given what time we had to bolster our defenses...it wasn’t enough. Damn...things look bad right now, I know. We just have to stay in this.”

Krysta pushed herself away from the rail and straightened her posture. He was right. “How’s Liara holding up?”

“Learning that your entire religion and beliefs were false...another punch to the abdomen.”
“I need to go talk to her.” Krysta clenched her fists. “Then, I’m going to find a way to hit Cerberus hard. It’s time to knock them out of the game.”

“You know I’m with you.” Garrus then cleared his throat as his mandible twitched slightly. “I’m, uh, not sure if you heard the news about Wrex. Overheard the report from Glyph before Liara locked herself up.”

“You were spying on her?” Krysta cocked an eye brow at him as she crossed her arms with a grin.

Garrus cleared his throat again and rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “Well, um, not exactly. I was just passing by…near her quarters. Okay, fine. I was listening in to see if there was any more news from Palaven. She seems to be getting all the intel first hand as the Shadow Broker.”

Krysta’s smile quickly faded. “I’m sorry, Garrus. Any news?”

“Not Palaven. I’m sure there will be something soon…” He shrugged. “Eve is pregnant.”

The news completely floored her, and Shepard tried to hide her squeal of pleasure from something good for once to hear about. “That’s great!” She thought back to Mordin Solus and how determined he was to cure the genophage. To fix his mistakes. Even if that meant forfeiting his own life in the process. She missed his songs on the ship and his constant rambling about his studies. “When I see Wrex again, remind me to refer him to as Papa Wrex.” She finally allowed herself to giggle. It was hard to imagine a hardened ex-bounty hunter become a father of children. What stories he would tell them! Hopefully, some would be about her and how she helped his kind.

Specialist Samantha Traynor saluted Krysta as she exited the war room with Garrus. “Mam, I received this cryptic message a minute ago.”

The confused look on her face made Krysta uneasy as she accepted the data pad. The origin of the message was unknown, most likely, a scrambler in place. “Lost something?” Krysta read the message out loud. Her eyes narrowed at the sender’s name. “K.L.” She growled and threw the pad to the floor. “Damn sick bastard. He really pisses me off.” She knew the statement had to be a pure implication of what transpired on Thessia. What else could it mean? Kai Leng was already gloating about his victory.

“Salt in the wound.” Garrus watched on curiously. He wasn’t shocked at all by her reaction. Kai Leng was becoming a huge thorn in their sides. “I’m with you, Shepard. We need to take this bastard out. For Thane’s sake if none other.”

“Not just Thane’s. For every person lost to the Reapers after Thessia. Cerberus is responsible. Their blood is on their hands. Not mine.” Her chest heaved as pressure built up inside. “Garrus, tell everyone to meet in the war room asap! Traynor, found out anything you can on Cerberus.”

Samantha saluted once more. “I’m on it, Commander.”

“Understood.” Garrus darted to Liara’s quarters first.

Krysta glanced over at the galaxy map as she tried to hold in the anger that was gushing inside of her like magma in a volcano. “I’m coming for you, Illusive Man.”

************************

“I am to congratulate you. You did well on Thessia and now we have the upper hand.” The blue holo image of the Illusive Man’s upper torso stared at Kai Leng in the small communications room.

After leaving Horizon, Kai Leng hit the relay to jump to another section of the Attican Traverse. There, he connected with an outpost satellite station that was in Mindoir’s orbit. That sector was not
hit by the Reapers yet. It was a small farming colony and even smaller since the Batarian slave raid in the year 2170. Their lower numbers didn’t flag the Reapers and it was a perfect place to remain out of sight for Cerberus. The satellite station was the hub point for their small facility groundsie on the outskirts of the colony.

“Shepard didn’t die.” Kai Leng fumed internally. He was sulking. Thessia was his chance at payback for failing on the Citadel. Even though he did achieve his mission, he didn’t get the chance to kill her. She was a very determined and skilled fighter. He was better. He knew that he was.

“In due time, Kai Leng.” The Illusive Man paused to knock the embers off his cigarette into the ashtray that was out of the holo image. “We need to keep our focus. My scientists say we are ready to implement phase one of my new plan.”

Kai Leng remained silent. He knew what it was. The Illusive Man would personally see it through by implementing reaper tech into his own body. “You have the data from Lawson?” He kept himself well informed to remain one step ahead of his boss to continue to be the ideal agent.

“I’m sending you to Sanctuary next along his new test subject. Excellent work on getting another Batarian. It seems it may be our breaking point.”

“It better be.” Leng seethed. “He is taking too long.”

“Research does take time. If you rush it, things get…messy. You saw what happened outside the Omega 4 Relay.”

“Understood.” Kai Leng didn’t offer a rebuttal. The adjutants project was a complete disaster and luckily for them, it happened on Omega. If it happened outside the Reaper War and on a human colony, then it would be hard to get away from the bad press with the Alliance.

“How were your upgrades?” The Illusive Man casually asked out.

Kai glanced down at his upgraded legs. He suffered severe ligament damage after squaring up with Anderson when they tried to take out Grayson. Another fiasco. The damage was so bad that his body wouldn’t simply heal without any setbacks. He could get around on his own in time, but there would be a limp and it would slow him down. That would hold him back. The Illusive Man suggested using some of the Reaper Tech that they salvaged to manifest an upgrade to his legs and making him more equipped than ever. He reluctantly agreed. The procedure was painful, but he could see more of a quickness to him despite the side effects: terrible headaches from time to time. “They are sufficient.”

“Good to hear.” The Illusive Man took another puff from his cigarette. “You are a valuable asset to Cerberus.” A firm reminder.

“What about the girl?” Kai Leng changed the subject, thinking back to Avery, who was in a room kept under guard. Even if she did as she was told by bringing Bray and the other Batarian to them, he didn’t trust her. He really didn’t trust anyone.

“Still valuable. She seems loyal to our cause.”

“So was Grayson,” Kai argued.

“Grayson had…issues that we failed to keep on tabs.” The Illusive Man chose his words carefully. Kai Leng knew that he wouldn’t admit that he judged his character poorly. To Leng, Grayson was a red sand junkie that got too close to the enemy: One of Aria’s people. Just like Shepard. It sickened him that an alien could have that kind of influence over humans. Aria was another target that he
wanted to take out in time. “Keep her with Jones. He will keep an eye on her. We will need her to maintain Shepard’s attention. Miranda has been seen recently on the Citadel talking to Shepard.”

Another traitor in Kai’s eyes. “Want me to handle her?” He tossed out.

The Illusive Man paused as if he was contemplating the request. “No. I know she’s keeping tabs on her father. She may grab Shepard’s attention to Horizon. That project must not fail. That’s why I need you to get the data from him before it’s shut down. I will need to make sure Jones keeps Shepard away. Dealing with Miranda right now may be too late.”

“If I see her while I’m there…” Kai Leng prided eagerly. He never did like her. Jealousy was never a reason that he would admit to. She held the Illusive Man’s interest as one of his top agents, just like Kai Leng. Her keen mind and skills in biology and cybernetics made her deadlier in other ways.

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“You should be asking where the hell you are going.” Jones’ retort was smug. He motioned the soldiers ahead to grab hold of him.

Sh’sk clenched his fists and stood his guard at the approaching soldiers. As one grabbed him from behind, he stepped back and struck the man hard in the face, then he whirled around and kicked the other, knocking him back. The soldiers scrambled for their footing as they moved towards him again. Sh’sk held his own and jumped out of the way. Jones shook his head in disappointment by his men and quickly knocked Sh’sk with a strong biotic blast that pinned him against the wall hard. Sh’sk groaned loudly as his body careened into the metal. He fought to break the stasis field that held him. “I guess I have to do everything myself.” Jones shook his head and gave a grin back at Kai Leng, who stood at the door, looking unimpressed.

“Bring him and come on. I need to go.” Kai Leng left the room for the shuttle.

Sh’sk tried to fight, but the resistance was futile. “Let me go!” He yelled loudly. His voice caught the attention of the other inhabitants of the cells.

He heard Bray hitting his own cell door hard with his fist. “What are you doing with him?! Let him go!” Bray’s muffled voice came through his door.

“Hey! What’s going on out there?” Avery’s voice came through the opposite side. “Let me out!”

Once Jones dropped Sh’sk in the shuttle cargo hold, Kai Leng delivered a strong blow to the back of the Batarian’s head before he was able to get up on his feet, knocking him out cold. “I don’t want to hear him on the way there.” Kai Leng stared down at him in disgust.
Jones shrugged as he looked on. “I hear ya.”

Kai then looked his way. “Don’t screw this up.”

“I think I have been more successful lately than you.” Jones smirked as he lifted an eye ridge. He continued to hold his gloating facial expression until the shuttle door’s closed and it launched from its dock. He moved back to the holding cells to where Bray was held first. Taking out a serrated blade, he grinned as he stepped inside with several armed guards behind him. Bray was already standing when the man entered “I’m glad you are finally awake.”

“Go to hell.”

Jones chuckled at this. “You, Batarians, are always so angry. You know if you are a little bit nicer, maybe someone would like you.”

Bray didn’t flinch or let down his guard. He eyed the man and his soldiers carefully. He had no idea where his friend went, and he assumed that he would have the same fate. “Where am I?”

“Why? You think she will save you?” Jones grinned, referring to Aria. “Aria has no idea where you are, I’m sure. We are far from her reach. You may as well settle in. You are going to be here for a while. Can I offer you a drink?” The last question was suggested in a sarcastic tone.

“Fuck you, human. What do you want with me?” Bray snapped. He wasn’t in the mood to play mind games with a Cerberus operative. His body still ached from the encounter he had on Omega and the effects of the dragoons’ weapons didn’t completely dissipate. He struggled to stand from the dizziness.

Jones smiled from ear to ear as he gently pressed the tip of the blade up against his finger and twirled it. He could feel the razor sharpness of it against his flesh, barely breaking the skin. “Cerberus needs your help. We need to get Shepard’s attention and it seems that you may have it at this moment. As much as it sickens me.”

“I’m not helping you.” Bray laughed. “You brought me here for nothing.”

The smile remained on Jones face as he slowly paced the floor, looking at his captive eagerly. “If I was desperate, I would demand your cooperation by threatening your friend’s life…oh.” He stopped himself and smiled even wider. “Sorry, I believe he was needed elsewhere. I can’t use him now, can I?”

“Where did you send him to?” Bray growled lowly as he kept his fists bawled, eying him carefully.

Jones shrugged indifferently. “Not like it really matters. You won’t be going there to join him. Trust me, you are better off staying right here…” He eyed his knife again with a hint of sadistic pleasure. “Maybe not right now….”

Bray caught on to his undisclosed indication. “What did you do to him….”

Jones gave a false hurtful expression then smiled once more as he removed the knife tip from his finger. “Me? Nothing. Henry Lawson runs a facility on Horizon for all the…. refugees of the war. They turn out to be very useful test subjects for us.”

“You sick fuck!” The idea of his friend being a test subject enraged Bray. He charged at Jones quickly with his fist reared back, ready to make a hard blow. Jones waited till he was just on top of him before quickly side stepping and tripping Bray with a quick swift of his right foot. The momentum made Bray keep going as he lost his balance and slid hard into the floor. Jumping up
quickly, Bray spun to strike again, but Jones evaded once more and grabbed his striking fist, countering with a heavy blow to his head with a roundhouse kick. The impact caused Bray’s body to flip over and slam onto his back on the ground once more. His head throbbed as the room spun, his condition aggravated by the hit. He groaned as he tried to regain his footing. He rolled onto his knees, but Jones was on him again, striking him hard in the back with a hard elbow strike. His entire back ached with pain and his entire face slammed into the ground, busting his lip. He spat blood out as he moved again to get up. Jones watched on with his amusement. “You’re an excellent punching bag, Batarian. I haven’t been able to practice my katas for some time.”

“What the hell is that?” Bray staggered as he got back on both feet this time, waiting for another to strike to come to him.

Jones shook his head. “Tsk. Tsk. You need to study the art of war more closely. There are thousands of fighting techniques. I have studied many of them.”

“You talk like a smug Salarian.” Bray wiped the blood that dripped down from his wound. “It really pisses me off.”

“I guess this doesn’t mean that you are willing to help us with Shepard, are you?” Jones asked with a gleam in his eye.

“What the hell do you think?” Bray raised his guard again.

The sight of him made Jones laugh once more. “Good. I was hoping you would say that. Torture is my specialty.” He pondered another notion silently in his mind. “Perhaps, I should have Avery come and watch.”

“She’s not my friend. She betrayed Shepard. Bring her in here and I’ll kill her.” Bray shot back. He couldn’t believe that an acquaintance of Shepard who seemed like she really wanted to help them, was that quick to turn her back on her. What did Cerberus offer her? What did they tell her? From the enigmatic statements she was making, it sounded like Cerberus filled her mind with lies. Why did she accept that as fact so quickly? Instead of killing her, he did want to ask her more questions about what she said without their interference. To Cerberus, he would not tell them that.

“What I’m asking you to do is very simple...even a race such as yours can comprehend this.” In one swift motion, Jones found the second that Bray let his guard down as he was listening in on his words and delivered a strong jab to his stomach. Bray instantly lost his breath and bent over as he fought back the sudden need to vomit. He coughed as he struggled to regain his breath. His body spasming from the blow. Jones stood still as he looked on without any pity.

Bray snapped his head to the right to look up at him. “Heh, you have...to...do...better...than...that...human, “He gasped in between breaths.

Jones’ didn’t flinch as he swiftly kicked Bray again in the head, making his head snap back as his body reeled across the floor. Blood spurted out of Bray’s mouth as the other side of his lip was busted and blood poured down. His face and eyes on his right side were now swollen. Beads of sweat were over his face and he spat blood on the floor as he stared at the metal surface, suppressing the pain that throbbed repeatedly throughout his body. “Damnit...”

“I’m sure Shepard wouldn’t like to see you this way. Just give me one simple message and then this pain will be cease.” Jones looked on.
Bray didn’t look the man’s way nor let any words come out of his bloody mouth. He lifted his hand and flipped him off. A human gesture that he picked up on Omega. At least some of his interactions with the species were helpful. This didn’t amuse Jones and he let out a rage of aggravation as he swiftly caught Bray again in the stomach with his foot and struck him with his fist before his body had time to fly back more across the room. Bray’s head struck the wall with a sickening whack and his body slumped on the ground. A red hue overwhelmed his vision and he knew if he continued to receive blows to his head that he would be done for. It hurt to breathe, and he pretty much knew that the last attack did crack at least a rib or two. He wheezed to get his breath. His entire body shook as he struggled to push himself up from the ground once more. The Batarian’s defiance was not amusing to Jones. The operative looked on and rolled his eyes. He too knew if he continued to push it any further, he would kill him and that wasn’t the Illusive Man’s wishes. As much as he enjoyed the senseless beating of a less superior race, Jones restrained himself from continuing. However, he wouldn’t give Bray the satisfaction of simply stopping because that were his orders. He had to take it another direction. “That was round one. I’ll be back again. Let that sink in. I would suggest you complying.” He motioned for the soldiers to leave the room with him and he locked the door. Once Bray was certain that they were gone, he allowed himself to lay back down on the floor, letting his head rest. No matter how tightly he shut his eyes, his mind still spun around in the darkness.

A voice in the void spoke to him. “Is she really worth this?” Was this his subconscious state talking to him or was it some Cerberus trick? He wouldn’t answer it.

Jones wiped the blood off his fist after he exited the room and glared at the bloody towel in disgust. He then shoved the towel back in the female attendant’s hands that met him at the door outside of Bray’s unit. “That went well.” He grumbled at the blonde standing in front of him.

“You think he will crack?” She asked.

“Who cares. I didn’t expect him to.” His hazel eyes darted across the hall to where Avery’s room was. “She will give us what we need.”

“You really think she’s on our side now?”

“Doubt it, but we just need her to bring Shepard to us.”

“She won’t endure like it did in there.” Like most Cerberus loyalists, she wouldn’t really address the Batarian. ‘It’ was a term that was low enough for her.

“I’m going to approach this a different way. Kai Leng seemed to start it off nicely. She just needs a little more encouragement.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Avery joins up with Cerberus. Is she deceived?

Avery copyrighted by rpgwarrior4824

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER: 34

Avery hated the room she was in. She did not know what was going on and why she was being locked up as well as a prisoner. Didn’t Kyle tell them that she was on their side? The images of Sh’sk and Bray being ambushed were still burnt in her mind. She had no love for them, but did they truly deserve what happened to them? What would Krysta say to all of this? Surely, she would be upset, but then she would realize how much Bray used her and whatever companionship he offered was a complete lie to get Omega back. Avery knew she would soon see the light.

Outside, she could hear Sh’sk protesting whatever they chose to do with him and could hear the pounding of boots as he was dragged away and then there was Kyle’s voice. When did he return? Did he not know she was also locked up? Where was Bray? A large pit formed inside her stomach. What if she was wrong? What if the whole picture wasn’t exactly what Kyle painted for her? Before she had any more time to ponder over all that had transpired, the door to her room opened and in stepped Jones. The man’s appearance was calm, just as he appeared at the warehouse. He almost seemed satisfied as his hazel eyes fell upon her. “Sorry for your current setting, my dear.”

“Why am I in here?! Where’s Kyle? I demand to speak with him!” Avery found her voice and she could hear her own demands.

“Kyle…” Jones paused. “He…had urgent business to go to. Trust me, I am well suited to carry out the rest of this. I need your help still. You have no idea how important you are.”

Avery tilted her head in confusion. “I am?” She shook her head. “What did you guys do with the Batarians?” She tried not to sound too concern over their wellbeing, but deep down inside, she knew that she was.

“We simply are worried about Commander Shepard’s overall health. You and I both agree that she has changed, Avery.” Jones sidestepped the question as he leaned his back up against the wall and crossed his arms casually. “Her main influence is this…Bray. We really didn’t expect a liability.”

“I didn’t plan on bringing two.” Avery argued, knowing that he was referring to Sh’sk. She clasped her fingers and looked down at them, feeling guilty. Another screw up on her end?

“We can’t have him too close to our operations. Aria may come after us. We will place him…at another facility until this is over. No harm, no foul. We will send him back in time with our condolences.

“And Bray?” Avery asked.
“Are you concerned?” Jones turned the table on her, catching her up on her genuine sincerity of his current state. He gave a loud sigh of exasperation and stood back up. “Avery, Avery…Kyle said you wanted to help us. You wanted to help Shepard.”

“I do!” Avery urgently protested as she moved over to grab his arm from leaving the room. “Look. I... I have been too long on Omega. Been around other species too long. I just want…I just want Krysta back. I want…” She could feel the tears forming in her eyes. “I want my family back….”

Jones stared at her silently, rubbing his goatee. “I can understand. The aliens can be very influential. They seem to have corrupt us once we found the Mass Relays. We all know what happened in the First Contact War and then we befriended the same Turians who looked to slaughter us from exploring!” His voice heightened by the propaganda that he truly believed in since his own initiation. “And your family?”

“They...I don’t know where they are. They were on Earth. I was on the Citadel when my city was attacked. I never heard from them and they were not in the refugee camp….” Her words choked her as she continued to hold back the sadness that was inside of her.

Jones’ voice softened. “We all lost someone. Commander Shepard is the crux for humanity. If she is swayed by the aliens, then humanity will be lost. More families will be separated. I’m trying to help…and I know you want to.”

“I do.” Avery wiped her eyes. “God, why can’t this be easy?”

“We try to humanize the other races to make things more familiar, but then we lose ourselves. Shepard is lost, Avery. She lost her lover, Kaidan Alenko in the fight against Saren and the Geth. She has been unstable since then.” Jones stepped closer to her. “War is never easy, and neither is the struggle. The Batarians are our enemies as well. Don’t let them fool you.” Jones hesitated briefly to let his words sink in. “He did admit to his treacherous act. I just spoke with him.”

“I heard him in pain.” Avery looked at the man in front of her for an explanation. She tried her best to earlier block out the sound of Bray being assaulted in the cell next to her.

“When I questioned him about his motivations. He did admit to betraying Shepard to seize Omega from us. The Batarians do not care for us. I confess that my anger got the best of me when I overheard him say that he willingly led Shepard to believe that he cared for her. Aria’s war against Cerberus has caused Shepard fight more against Cerberus and we are losing the war against the Reapers because we are too busy fighting one another.”

“He used her…?” Avery shook her head in disbelief and she glared angrily at her door. “That bastard… Kyle was right! He admitted to it!”

“He did.” Jones tried to hold back the smile from hearing her take the story hook, line and sinker.

“What now? Am I going to be set free?” Avery’s voice peaked in desperation. “I mean I’m on your side.”

Jones this time smiled. “Yes, consider this to be your initiation and your first mission. You will assist me on this crucial mission. Do this and I’ll promote you to operative.”

The idea of a promotion grasped her attention and she nearly jumped up and down for the
opportunity for the status change. She never got far with the Talons. Even on the Citadel, she took a few odd clerical jobs as an intern while she conducted her studies. “Sweet! What do I have to do?”

“We have a small base outside the colony on Mindoir for observation. We need to get Shepard here. She needs to hear the truth for herself. Can you send a message to her?” He tapped his omni tool to bring up his recorder.

“Um sure. What should I say?”

“Due to conflicts right now, don’t say you are with Cerberus. She won’t answer. Just say that you and Bray are captured by us. Don’t even mention the other Batarian.”

“Sh’sk.” Avery corrected him. “If I say I was captured by you guys, would she not want to trust you when she gets here?”

Jones shook his head. “Don’t worry. She will be angry at first, but once she hears the truth and what you risked getting her back, she will be grateful.” He brought up the program. “You ready?”

“Sure.”

“Begin.”
“Sanctuary, huh? Damn. What cowards.” James Vega shook his head as he watched Krysta carry her gear into the shuttle. The tough built, buzz-cut marine was leaning up against the shuttle’s doorway with his arms crossed. Conflict soured his facial expression.

“That’s an educated guess, James.” Krysta reminded him soothingly as she stopped to address his concern. “Traynor was able to track Kai Leng’s signal into that sector.”

“Hiding with civilians though?” James tossed back out. “Why can’t wars be simple? How the hell can you tell friend from foe when the enemy is using scared civilians as shields?”

“Warfare is never clear, James. Not for decades.” Krysta returned to stowing away her gear in the compartment. “Heh, will be like Feros all over again.”

This grabbed the young brash marine’s attention. “Feros?”

“Yeah. There was a plant creature called the Thorian. Exogeny at Zhu’s Hope was studying it. Just like the Reapers, it managed to control the colonists and turned them against me.”

“Plant, huh?” James stared at her quizzically.

“A daisy or pansy, Commander?” Cortez tossed out from his pilot chair, becoming interested in the conversation now as well. He chuckled a little by his own joke.

“A big ass plant.” Krysta explained. She didn’t wait for any more questions to lead her on. “I had to kill the ones that got in my way…most of the colonists.” She thought back to Fai Dan and how he struggled to regain his own mental state. He ended up putting a gun to his head before it was over.

“Tragic. I’m sure you didn’t have a choice, Commander.” Steve’s voice softened as he turned back around to his final checks before they parted off to Horizon.

“She didn’t.” Ashley interjected as the long hair brunette walked up to the shuttle with her own gear. “I was there. It was either that or let the colonists tear us apart.”

“We’re soldiers. We know our orders and we carry them out. If you want to be part of the N7 program, you need to learn that.” Krysta turned her attention on James.

“I am. Still bullshit about Cerberus.” James growled under his breath as he moved away from the doorway to enter the shuttle. His eyes panned over to where Steve Cortez sat behind the controls.
“We ready to go bust some heads, Mr. Cortez?”

“In a few, Mr. Vega.” Steve’s fingers dashed over the controls as he worked his way through the flight check list in his head. “You know we will have some weight capacity to pick up a few refugees if we need to.”

“They are safer on Horizon, Steve.” Krysta found her seat and buckled in her harness for the departure. “The only thing I want to bring back is Kai Leng’s dead body, so I can personally deliver it to the Illusive Man.”

Bray slowly log rolled himself up from the cot in his newly acquired cell. A few hours after his “interrogation” by Jones, he was transported down to planet side to a new facility just a few clicks from the Mindoir colony. He winced sharply in pain and held his side gently from the two rib fractures. He noticed that sometime during his unconscious state that the wounds on his face and lips were treated and the swelling did decrease. His head still throbbed from the concussion he endured, and a wave of nausea struck him as he tried to look around at his new surroundings. Sitting still, he waited for the feeling to pass before making any more movements, afraid that he would wretch on the floor. He doubted anyone would bother come to clean up after him and he really didn’t want to smell his own vomit during his stay. He sat on the cot’s edge and eyed his current situation. A single room with no window and the only way in or out was a door that mostly was locked by some type of bypass lock.

A few moments later, the door to his cell opened and in stepped Avery. Her appearance also changed from their last encounter. Her hair was flowing down past her waist instead of pulled up in a ponytail and she was sporting a Cerberus uniform that fit perfectly, showing off her athletic physique. “Hello, Bray.” She stood at the door’s entrance timidly as she gazed upon him, almost ashamed for her new attire. A pair of soldiers were standing behind her at the ready.

Bray felt his chest tightening as he saw her. His fists clenched with his nails digging into his flesh. Every inch of him wanted to leap up from the cot and take his revenge for her treachery. He fought the instinct and remained poised, ready to listen to whatever explanation she would try to force upon him. “Glad to see you fully support them now and not just half ass it anymore,” He spat coldly at her. “Bray, I didn’t want any harm to come to you or Sh’sk…I just need Krysta to listen.” Avery stepped closer into the room.

“Listen to what?” He threw up his arms in exasperation. He was tired of these word games with her. “She’s turning her back to humanity and becoming more sympathetic to the other species. People are dying out there.” The young woman’s voice rose as her own personal emotions merged in.

“You think the Reapers only want humans?” Bray shook his head as he finally pushed himself up, biting down on his lip to ignore the pain that radiated throughout his body. “The news vids said that Khar’ Shaan fell before Earth. That’s my kind! My friends! My…” He paused, remembering his past on Khar’ Shaan before he fled the Hegemony to find a new way of life. “My family…” He lost contact from the home world ever since his exodus. He wasn’t even sure if his family was still on the planet when it was attacked by the Reapers. Most likely they were and most likely they didn’t survive.

Avery felt her lips tremble as she heard him answer her declarative statement. She almost related with him. She had no idea that he had any connection to the Batarian homeworld and just assumed that he was originally from Omega. Doubt started to seep in her mind like mist from a river.
“Don’t let his lies get to you, Avery.” Jones interrupted their private chat as he walked in behind her. “I told you it was unwise to speak with him alone. You see what poison they give you.”

“You are really pissing me off….” Bray narrowed his eyes at the man’s approach and he growled lowly in his chest. Rage swept over him and he almost wished for a pack of Varren to come in and tear him limb from limb slowly, ingesting him alive.

“The Batarians are inferior to us, Avery.” Jones turned to ignore him and face her directly. “They tried to stop us before and failed…failed so bad that they lost their embassy on the Citadel and became an isolated race. Too proud to admit defeat. Now they attack from the shadows and prey upon the weak colonists in the Traverse. You know what Batarian slavers do to children and women?”

Avery shook her head slightly as she listened to him. Growing up, she heard nightmarish tales about slave raids on colonies, but she never had to experience any of that while on Earth. “Not all of us do that, asshole.” Bray argued from his position. “Check your history logs.”

“Oh, that’s it. They also sell drugs.” Jones shrugged. “What else do you do? Mankind explores and find ways to protect ourselves. Cerberus has done a lot to keep humanity safe. We just never get the recognition like the Alliance. Many people view us as terrorists, Avery. Let me assure you that we are not that. Sometimes, we may need to get our hands dirty, but it’s all for the greater good.

“Humans sell drugs too,” Bray scoffed. “Get your damn facts straight. You haven’t been to Omega obviously, human. The humans are part of the Eclipse and Blue Suns gangs. They all sell sand. Humans enjoy creds just as much as any other race out here.”

Jones clenched his jaw tightly as the Batarian prisoner was getting the best of him. “Why am I bothering arguing with you, scum?”

“Is Shepard coming?” Avery pressed. She really didn’t have the complete mentality as the guy in front of her who was very racist in his views, but she still had a common fear.

“The message was sent. As soon as the Normandy is near a comm buoy, it will be intercepted.” Jones assured her with a smile.

“Where is she now?” The answer wasn’t enough for Avery. Time was going by slowly. She glanced over at Bray. She was hoping for time with him alone. She wanted to confront him about his betrayal against Krysta privately. She wanted to hear it herself and seek the truth behind it.

“The Normandy has stealth capabilities, so right now, we haven’t been able to track her. Our last contact was on Thessia.”

“Thessia? You mean the Asari homeworld?” Avery recalled her lessons growing up. Thessia didn’t make the news much on Earth, but she heard about it from time to time on the news kiosks that lined the walls at the Citadel.

“Was.” Jones corrected her. “Sad to say, but the Reapers got there. Cerberus attempted to provide some aid. Shepard ceased our efforts.”

“Why?” Avery gaped at him.

“Liar…” Bray laughed lightly and winced again, feeling a pain in his side from the movement. He looked at her in disbelief. “You really believe this shit, don’t you?”

“Shepard sees Cerberus as an enemy. Thessia fell because instead of fighting the Reapers, she turned
on us. We had to pull back.” Jones paused as a soldier approached him and handed him a datapad. The man read over it quickly, his facial expression mutated slightly from calmness to concern, but the change was quick and almost unnoticeable. He turned to the soldier. “Is he on comm?”

“Yes, sir.” The response came from the soldier’s helmet. Without a word, Jones turned and marched out of the room to address whatever news came in.

Bray and Avery exchanged silent looks. Both were curious about the body of the message. Seeing her opportunity, she stood straighter and slowly took a breath. “You admitted it?”

“What?”

“About betraying Shepard…using her for your own personal gain. For Aria’s…”

“I…” He stopped when he saw Jones walk back in the room, still flustered about the urgency of the message.

“Avery, leave him. I will deal with him after I take this call.”

“Who is it?” Defeated about losing her opportunity, Avery followed him out willingly.

“The Illusive Man.” Jones answered after he shut the door to make sure their conversation would not fall upon the Batarian’s ears. Their business was of no concern to his; at least now yet.

“What did he want?” Baffled, she hurried behind him to keep up with his pace as he moved down the hallway to the communications room.

“Horizon has been hit.” Jones rolled his eyes as he stopped at the door. “I can’t believe this shit…we were so close. I knew Henry was taking his sweet time.” He moved into the room and shut the door behind him quickly, blocking her entry.

Avery stopped just as the door closed in her face. Puzzled, she looked back down the hall where the pair of guards were guarding Bray’s cell and then back to the communications room. “What’s on Horizon?”
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Krysta deals with the aftermath of Sanctuary. Is Cerberus going too far? She learns disturbing noise following the chaos. Jones has another "friendly" chat with Bray.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 36

The punching bag swung rapidly from Krysta’s relentless strikes. The muscles in her arms ached from overuse and she could feel her heart pumping in overtime to catch up with her workout. Her entire chest was covered in sweat, soaking her sports bra. She was donned in her work out pants and bra only. No matter how tired she was, she wouldn’t let up. To James and Steve who watched on, the punching bag was just a standard issued with no abnormal material. To Krysta, this was an embodiment of the Illusive Man. She desired so much for it to be him instead in the flesh. She never wanted to kill someone so badly in her life until she departed from the Sanctuary refugee camp. Her mind flashed back to the empty pods in the labs, the dorms of the inhabitants and the waves of the Reaper troops that took their places. Horizon was overwhelmed with Banshees, Marauders, Cannibals, but Husks were the majority. All those innocent people coming to Sanctuary with hopes to escape the war to only have the same outcome that they fled from. How come someone be driven to that extreme point? The Illusive Man pledged himself to be the champion of humanity and yet his methods almost seemed to be line in with the Reapers. She thought back to the phrase that Saren Arterius told her on Virmire, “Is submission not preferable to extinction?” Is that what the Illusive Man believed in? To top things off, Henry Lawson, Miranda’s father, was the center of the monstrosity. Thinking more on this made her anger grew. She quickened her punches. She jumped back and then came at it with a hard-flying right kick. The force caused the bag to snap from its chain harness and collapse to the ground feet away from where she stood. Her hazel eyes stared down at it as she panted hard, wiping the sweat off her face with the back of her hand.

James whistled, shocked by the intensity of her workout. He cracked a grin over to Cortez who was also watching in awe. “Nice, Commander.”

So, involved in her own thoughts, Krysta didn’t realize that she had a captivated audience. She walked over to grab her sweat towel from the bench. “I didn’t think anyone was up this late.”

“Hard to sleep.” James shrugged lightly. “Heard that Sanctuary was rough. That bad, huh?”

Krysta glared at him sternly. “Rough is not quite the term that I would use to describe it, James. Hell is more like it.”

“I knew it couldn’t be good when I dropped you off.” Cortez sadly commented. “No signs of anyone around…never a good sign.”

“Ashley wouldn’t say anything about it. We need to take down these sick bastards.” The marine
appeared to be troubled and antsy. He was itching for battle. They all were. They were becoming stir crazy on the Normandy.

"Nor will I. I thought Eden Prime was rough after the Geth attacked. This was similar, but at all another level." Ashley Williams spoke for herself as she walked over from the elevator. She overheard their conversation once she reached the level that they were on. "I was on Horizon when the Collectors hit there as well. The entire colony was gone, and Cerberus uses what was left for this…" Her posture was straight and stiff. She turned to look at Krysta. "I’m with James, Mam. Let’s go after the sick sons of bitches."

Steve chuckled as he heard her tone. "She’s feisty, Commander."

Krysta’s face lit up and she allowed herself to smirk at the question. "Already on top of that one, James." Knowing where Kai Leng ran off to was a breath of fresh air. She would take him down and then move on to his boss. "Kai Leng was tracked heading towards the Horsehead Nebula. We’re heading there now."

"Am I missing the party?" Liara walked up to them with her hand on her hip, cocking an eye ridge towards the group.

"Not at all, Liara." Krysta acknowledged her presence with a warm smile at her old friend.

"EDI said you were down here. Can’t sleep still?"

"Is that even a question?" Krysta chuckled. "You mined the data we collected from Horizon?"

"Glyph’s programs are very useful. I’m still going over the manifest of refugees, so we can try to submit it over to the Citadel. Bailey assured me of C-Sec’s cooperation. With so many systems impacted by the Reapers, it will be hard to get transmissions to the other colonies." Liara wrung her fingers sadly as her deep blue eyes drifted down towards the cold metal floor. "There was… something else…"

Krysta felt a cold chill move up her spine and she held her breath. "Yes?" Nothing good ever seem to come from their Cerberus incursions. How could things get any worse besides losing Thessia and learning what horrible experiments Cerberus had on innocent lives?

"What is it, Liara?" Ash pressed insistently, giving a worried glance at her old XO.

"One of the names of the Batarians on Sanctuary was named Sh’sk Bek’tall. Late intake. From Omega." The Asari slowly allowed her gaze to move up to meet Krysta’s eyes once more.

"Is that supposed to mean something?" James scratched his head in confusion.

Krysta gulped slowly, allowing her mind to process the news. Her breathing became more rapid. "You sure of this?"

"Who’s Sh’sk?" Ashley looked at Krysta for an explanation to fill in the rest of them that remained clueless in the room.

“A Batarian on Omega, a friend of Bray. He helped take Omega back for Aria. He was one of her people. I didn’t think Cerberus had time to take any prisoners before fleeing the station after Oleg’s death.” While divulging of what she knew, she subconsciously began to wonder if Bray had any ties with Sh’sk on the planet. There was no mention of Sh’sk being taken prior to her leaving Omega. What happened after she left? Did the Illusive Man secretly have another faction that was hiding under their very noses? Waiting for the moment to strike against her? Why Sh’sk? He didn’t hold too
high of a ranking with Aria and no real ties to her. The sudden mention of his name didn’t settle with her. Dread began to flood her mind.

Liara picked up on the blood draining from her friend’s face. “Shall I alert Aria?” She asked calmly, trying to move the conversation ahead.

Krysta shook her head slowly. “No. I will handle it.” She glanced up at the ship’s intercom system. “EDI?” She knew that Joker was trying to get a few hours of shut eye in before they hit their next target.

“Yes, Shepard?” The AI responded quickly.

“Are we near a comm buoy?”

“Within five minutes.”

“I’m going to the war room; patch me in to Omega as soon as we are able to make a connection. It is urgent that I speak with Aria.”

“Understood.”

Krysta looked back down at her comrades, who were standing there silently, giving her time for her next command. “Get some rest. We have a hard fight ahead of us.” She hastily moved to the elevator. She had to put her mind to cease.

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Bray opened his eyes when he heard the door to his room open once more. Jones beamed as he walked in. Cautiously, Bray moved off his bed to confront him. The Cerberus agent stopped with an impressed look on his face. “You are healing nicely.” He tilted his head to the side to look towards the other side of Bray’s face where his injury was. “My medics did an excellent job patching you up.”

“You want a damn thank you?” Bray snapped coldly. “Piss on that.”

A wide grin spread across the man’s face. “The message has been sent to Shepard. It will ping as soon as she gets near a comm buoy. The Illusive Man is hoping that she comes to your rescue.” He took a step closer. “I’m hoping she ignores it.” Bray’s confused look made him eager at his private wish. Jones never did like the Batarians as a race. As an ex-Alliance officer stationed on Elysium during the raids on the Skyllian Verge, he managed to escape the onslaught by the Batarian raiders unscathed. His commanding officer made them retreat when they were outnumbered, and the casualties were high. The Batarians methods to the innocent lives on Elysium were barbaric. The vivid dark images were burnt eternally in his mind. Even though the Alliance’s retaliation on Torfan was a punch back, it was not enough in his mind for what they did. Fed up with all the hoops they had to jump through, he left the Alliance and joined the Cerberus at first chance. His marine skills made him an ideal candidate for an operative and he rose through the ranks. “I never had the chance to gut a Batarian.” He withdrew his serrated blade once more. “I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

Bray didn’t flinch from his threat. He stood down the man with his guard up. “That’s a nice blade. I’ll be sure not to scratch it when I shove it up your ass.” A cocky smile moved across his lips, bantering the man. It was time for some payback.

Jones scowled, and he tightened the grip on his blade. “Your time will come, Batarian scum. Right now, I have orders to hold you until we deal with Shepard. Then you’re all mine.”
“She won’t come,” Bray spat. “May as well try it now.” He knew that he was the bait after they talked about Shepard earlier. He didn’t know what plans they had stored for her, but it couldn’t be good. He was concerned for her safety and he hoped if he could take this guy out, he could find a way off Mindoir and warn Shepard.

“What makes you so damn special anyway?” Jones looked at him in dismay. “Shepard must really be desperate if she scraped the bottom of the galaxy for your kind. Shell shock does change a person I suppose.” He gave the blade another glance before holstering it back into place on his belt.

Bray kept his gaze and smiled even wider in pride. “Maybe because Batarians are better in the sack, human. I don’t go your gender way, but maybe you should try it. I am sure I can find someone for you on Omega. I know a nice brothel near Afterlife. Lots of us to choose from. You can even role play if that gets you off.”

Insulted to a point of enrage, Jones screamed as he went at Bray, catching him hard with a right uppercut. The sudden strike caused Bray to stumble back. Bray blocked the next attack and met the man in the face with a punch of his own. He did a cross punch, hitting him again. Jones stumbled backwards this time and Bray was on him with a swift kick to the abdomen. Holding the man in place, Bray struck again, blood splattering out from the man’s broken nose. Jones stumbled to regain his footing and ignored the blood that was gushing down his face. He yelled out as he unleashed a biotic blast that knocked Bray back ten feet and into the wall. Infuriated that the Batarian almost got the best of him, Jones aggressively moved towards him and delivered a singularity attack that lifted Bray up from his spot and into the air. His boots dangled to try to touch the floor. Jones spat out the blood that seeped between his lips. “How dare you…” He seethed.

Bray looked down at him as he no longer fought where he hovered in place. “Heh, I got you back.”

Suddenly, Jones’ omni tool chirped to alert him of an incoming call. Turning to it, he answered. The identification was scrambled, and he instantly knew it was from the Illusive Man himself. His boss was wise enough to never disclose his location, even to his own operatives. Treachery was among every faction that ever existed. All it took was creds and easy persuasion. He didn’t blame him. If he held the power as much as the Man did, he would be the same way. Though, he wouldn’t allow himself to sink to the aliens’ standards by allowing their kind to mingle with Commander Shepard and his team. That was a mistake on the Man’s part. Now, his prized possession was soiled. “Jones here.”

“Sanctuary has been compromised.” The Illusive Man’s voice was calm on the other end. In during times of turmoil, he always seemed to be composed.

“Shepard?” Jones gave Bray a glance, who he still held in midair. He wasn’t about to let down his guard while talking to his boss. Thankfully, the call was not a video. He wouldn’t dare to show that the Batarian got the best of him and injured his nose.

The Illusive Man paused at the reply. “The Reapers got there first. Shepard was just in the way.”

“And the data?”

“Leng recovered what he could. Shepard is getting too close to our operation. Has the message been sent?”

“It should reach her soon.”
“See that it does and keep me informed. Jones. This is critical. How is the prisoner?”

“It is being handled accordingly.”

“Good.” The connection severed.

Jones retracted his tool and released his hold on Bray. The Batarian crashed back down to the floor with a thud. The man snarled what he could of his nose in disgust as he watched. “Get comfortable. You will see Shepard soon enough.”

After he left the room, Bray groaned as he shifted his body up from the floor. The constant struggles against this Jones guy were becoming an aggravation to him. This guy was a formidable opponent and the confinement of his cell wasn’t ideal to go up against a strong biotic, especially when he was unarmed. Luckily for him, there were no new injuries and his prior fractures were not aggravated from their healing process. He began to wonder whatever became of his friend, Sh’sk. The Illusive Man said that the Reapers struck Sanctuary. Is that where Sh’sk went? He prayed to the gods that was not the case. Even if he was slated to go there, he hoped that by some small chance that the shuttle transporting Sh’sk was redirected somewhere else. What exactly was Sanctuary anyways? What data was the Illusive Man speaking to?
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Krysta Shepard goes to deliver bad news to Aria, but to only discovery that Cerberus had other plans on Omega. Garrus tries to convince Krysta from not walking into a trap. Will she play Cerberus’ little game or move ahead to Cronos Station?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 37

“You’re up early…or late?” Garrus tossed out to Traynor at her station as he yawned, coming off the elevator.

“I set an alarm for when we would hook up to the comm buoy, so I could download Shepard’s messages for her.” She glanced down at her terminal. “One is downloading now…let’s see…. Mindoir. How peculiar.”

“Mindoir?” Garrus stopped to look on. There was no activity coming from that colony. He tightened his mandible. Perhaps they were hit next.

“Complete. Audio recording…sender is…Avery?” She looked over at him for any thoughts on the matter.

Garrus recognized the name. He was with Shepard when they first met Avery on the Citadel years ago. Younger woman, smart and very polite. He remembered Shepard said that she ran into her on Omega and was part of the Talons now. Complete three sixty from her earlier status, but he suspected all people changed. He did after he left C-Sec, thanks to Shepard’s influence after dealing with Dr. Saleon and Sidonis. He had no qualms in their blood that he spilt. He was always believed an eye for an eye; he wished privately that he had time to toss back the proper justice to Dr. Saleon after the Salarian harvested organs out of his donors while they were still alive. “She moves around I see. I don’t blame her leaving Omega. Not quite what the Presidium has.”

Traynor noticed that he was still hanging around as if he was suspecting her to play the message. “Shepard is on a call currently with Aria. I shall give this to her when she’s off.”

“That’s right.” Garrus looked towards the direction of the war room. “I wonder how that is going.”

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“Shepard, I have been waiting after your…mech summoned me.” Aria’s holo image on the vid comm showed a displeased look on her face.

“EDI and she’s not a mech.” Krysta corrected her sharply. EDI did a lot for her crew and she would treat her as one of them. Her interaction with Legion over the year seemed to have changed her view on synthetics and organics interacting with one another. If only, the Quarians learned this before they went to war.

“Are you here to gloat?” Aria cut her off. “You got what you want after all. I must say that I am
impressed. You are becoming more like me. I just never expected that you would use me and recruit
my people without my…consult.”

“What the hell are you getting at?” Krysta was agitated already by her tone and her enigmatic
statement. She almost forgot the purpose of her call.

“Bray, Avery and Sh’sk seemed to have disappeared from Omega.”

A lump formed in Krysta’s throat as she heard the news. “When?”

“Hours, days, weeks...” The Asari shrugged. “One of my doorman informed me that the last time
they were spotted, Bray and Sh’sk were leaving the club and Avery approached them. They walked
away from the club and never came back. No trace to their omni tools. Cowardly of them to just
disable that feature. Stop the charade, Shepard. I won’t come after them.”

Krysta spied a Batarian standing on guard in the background. “I see that you had no problem
replacing them, Aria.”

“Garka?” Aria looked back his way. “He always has been on my payroll. I think you met him when
you first came to Omega.”

It was hard to make out his complete facial features in the distance, but Krysta didn’t bother to try to
recall her memory to her first encounter to figure out if what she said was fact or not. She thought
back to Liara’s manifest and paused the video. Fear crept in her mind. Liara did state that the mining
process was not complete. What if Bray’s and Avery’s names were on that list as well? Trembling,
she switched to the console to activate the ship’s intercom system and selected Liara’s room.

“Liara?”

A pause. “Yes, Shepard?”

“Can you cross reference the manifest for me? See if Avery or Bray’s names are on there.”

“Give me a moment...” Krysta could hear Liara using her computer to do the request. She held her
breath as she listened. Seconds later, she was able to breathe once more. “Their names are not
present.”

“Thank you.” She switched back to Aria’s screen.

The slight interruption irked Aria even more. “I hate being placed on hold, Shepard,” She fumed.
“Get to the point of this call.”

“Aria,” Krysta fumbled for her words. Her mind raced as she tried to figure out how now Sh’sk got
with Cerberus and where Avery and Bray were. Now it seemed her earlier conclusions were correct:
Cerberus was still on Omega! “I recently went to a refugee camp on Horizon called Sanctuary. It
seems it was a front for a Cerberus operation. They were turning the refugees to husks. All species:
Banshees, Cannibals, Husks, and Marauders.

“Makes sense. Cerberus failed with their adjutants out of the Omega 4 Relay and then went
somewhere else. What is it to me?” Aria shot back coldly.

Krysta bared down on her teeth as every fiber of her being wanted to somehow reach through and
strangle her. How could she be so heartless? Nyreen was right. Aria really didn’t care about her
people on Omega and only her power. She decided not to break the news to her gently. “When we
arrived, Cerberus was gone and what was left were killed by the Reapers. There were no civilians
left.” She waited a moment to allow her to think about what she was about to say. “I retrieved the list
of everyone that was processed at the facility. Sh’sk’s name was on it.”

This grabbed Aria’s attention. A look of anger and dread slowly moved over it. She lifted an eye ridge. “Sh’sk? Are you sure?”

“Batarian’s origin: Omega. What do you think?”

“Did you find him?”

“His originally state? No. A Cannibal in his place? Possibly. Hard to say. I didn’t see any survivors. All the Reaper forces I encountered, I killed.”

“And Bray?” Aria’s next question hit Krysta in the chest. Was it possible that she would never see him again well?

“His name wasn’t on the list.”

“Hah, the Illusive Man does like to hold grudges. If he thinks capturing Bray and Sh’sk to get me back on retaking Omega-“

“He didn’t do it because of you.” The pieces were all coming into place. There was a slight percentage chance that Avery simply got in the way during the attack, however, surely the Illusive Man knew that project was failing. Currently, he and Shepard were going at it to obtain information on how to stop the Reapers. If it was to get back at Aria, Avery would be the loose end and she would have been the one shipped off to Sanctuary. Not, Sh’sk. The Batarian had no connection to Shepard. He was the one who got in the way. “The Illusive Man took them to get at me. Bray and Avery are still alive. They have to be.”

“Are you saying that Cerberus was still on Omega? My station?” T’Loak’s voice rose, blocking out Krysta’s thoughts. “I never did like the idea of you coming to Omega when you searched for Mordin and Archangel. You have been a complete pain in the ass.”

“This is coming from someone who practically beg me to help them retake Omega.” Krysta rolled her eyes.

Traynor walked in with Garrus behind her at her heels. “Mam…. I think you outta hear this message.”

Krysta glanced once more to Aria and then disconnected the call. She knew that she would be furious that Shepard hung up on her, but she didn’t care. She was done with Omega. Things just took a turn for the worse and now she had no idea where Bray was and what kind of danger he was in; all because of her. Krysta took the data pad. “It can’t be any worse than what I just learned.”

She hit play on the recording. “Shepard, this is Avery. Cerberus captured me, Bray and Sh’sk. Bray and I are on Mindoir…I don’t know where they took Sh’sk. I’m scared. Bray is hurt bad. They plan on killing him. They told me to contact you. Please, Shepard. I don’t want to die out here. I wish I never left the Citadel. I have to go.” The recording confirmed her worst nightmare. They were all captured by Cerberus, and Sh’sk was sent to Sanctuary. The Illusive Man did want to get back at her and it seems that he found out about her connection to Avery and Bray. She never liked her friends or loved ones being used as pawns, but it seemed like she struck a chord against Cerberus and now they were playing even dirtier. “Joker, you awake?”

“Yeah…I just started my shift,” The pilot yawned over the intercom. “We should be at the coordinates in two hours.”
“Change of plans. Find a relay. I need to get to Mindoir.”

“Mindoir?” Joker questioned the change up. “You do realize that is like ten hours in the opposite direction at full speed.

“You heard me.” Krysta snapped at him, she shoved the data pad back into Traynor’s hands. “Keep tabs on the signal. Cycle it every five minutes. Don’t lose it.”

“I-I will.” Samantha fumbled as she held the pad.

Krysta stormed towards the armory while Garrus remained in tow. “Shepard, you do realize this is a trap that you’re walking into.”

“I know, Garrus.” She didn’t look back his way as she went into the elevator, the Turian was right behind her. “Too bad Kai Leng won’t be there.” Krysta stared at the elevator doors and then stepped off once they reached their destination. James and Steve were not back from their rests yet, so the floor seemed eerie from the quietness.

“Look, Shepard.” Garrus was not through yet. “I know you developed feelings for Bray, but the Illusive Man wants you away from his next plan of attack.” Krysta ignored the statement and went to open her locker, but Garrus pushed it back into place, keeping his hand pressed firmly to prevent opening. “You always talked sense into me, Shepard. Now, let me extend the favor. Don’t go to Mindoir. We all need you here.

Krysta felt hot tears at her eyes from his words. It was Virmire all over again. Stop Saren or save Kaidan. Why was she punished to be placed into this predicament again? If she chose to ignore this, and move forward against Cerberus, then their fates were sealed. If she moved to Mindoir, then she could possibly face her own defeat and lose the chance of stopping the Illusive Man once and for all. Since her arrival on Omega, she developed strong feelings for Bray. She would have never thought that a Batarian would now be first choice as a love interest, but fate was cruel. Perhaps a redemption after Torfan. Bray knew the risks of being involved with her, but he still didn’t deserve death and not Avery. She was young and admired Shepard as a mentor. She couldn’t let her down. The girl suffered enough after losing her family. “Garrus, I made up my mind.” She forcefully removed his hand from her locker and glared at him. “I’m going.”

Garrus sighed as he gave in and allowed her to fetch her things. “Don’t go in this alone again. Let me at least call Wrex for backup. I hate to say this, but we need a Krogan down there with us.”

“Us?” Krysta stopped what she was doing and gave a faint smile. “Whoever said anything about us? And when would you admit that you need Krogan aid?”

The Turian chuckled. “You may need a sniper and I’m your man, er, Turian. Wrex, well I feel bad that he’s missing action.”

“Then who do you suggest?”

“Someone who won’t stop me from killing every Cerberus agent I find down there.”

“Jack?” Garrus tossed out playfully. “You know she loves them,” He grinned sarcastically.

“She’s leading the students from Grissom Academy to the rendezvous point. She’s out too.”
“Damn. The list is getting smaller.”

Krysta nodded her head as she thought to the ones on her ship and their talents. She needed someone who had worked with her and Garrus since day one and could anticipate their moves. There was no room for error. That narrowed the list down to Ashley or Liara. Her Asari friend had no love for Cerberus, but she may lecture caution in their fight. Ashley, on the other hand, wouldn’t mind busting a few heads. She dealt with Cerberus with her when they went to help Admiral Kohaku. She seen first-hand on what they are capable of. She smiled at Garrus. “Tell Williams to be ready.”

Krysta finally allowed herself to exhale slowly to relieve the tension in her chest after she saw Garrus leave in the elevator to their sleeping quarters. “Hang in there, Avery and Bray. I’m coming to get you. No one is getting left behind.”
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Krysta Shepard squares up against Cerberus on Mindoir. She learns that she and Jones have a connection. Will Avery turn against her friend?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 38

Garrus shielded his eyes from the debris that stirred as Cortez lifted the shuttle back up after dropping Shepard and her squad off. They were about a mile from the bunker and five miles from the colony’s perimeter. “I really miss the Mako.”

Ashley laughed from his comment. “True that. Remember bouncing around in that thing?”

“Bouncing?” Krysta lifted her eyebrow at her friend.

Garrus cleared his throat. “Your driving… wasn’t smooth, Shepard.”

“I cleared damn mountains, didn’t I?” Krysta tossed back with a wide grin.

“That you did, Skipper. That you did,” Ashley giggled as she followed Shepard towards the bunker with their rifle at the ready.

“Any idea how we want to plan this? Just how many people are inside waiting to get us?” Garrus whispered as he took rear.

“I have no idea. Just stay sharp, Garrus. Get to point. I need a sniper to scope it out.” Krysta slowed her tracks and waved him on with her right hand.

The Turian hurried up in front and switched from his assault rifle to his prized sniper rifle. Stopping, he zoomed in on the scope to see how what kind of outside defense they would face. Double checking, he raised his right fist. Ashley gave Shepard a confused look. “No one?”

Garrus switched back out his weapons and shook his head. “Not a soul. No artillery batteries. No towers to worry about.”

“This is the place, right?” Ashley looked around to make sure there was no sign of any other bunker in the distance.

Shepard shook her head. “This is it, Ash. They must have the party reception inside.” She motioned them to continue along behind her. With each step, her heartbeat quickened. What would she find inside? Were her friends even there? Were they alive?

“Not to make a Krogan reference, but this feels like walking right into a thresher maw’s den…” Garrus spoke out softly again.
“Awe, you miss Wrex. That’s cute.” Ashley teased lightly as she looked behind with a smile.

Garrus frowned playfully. “No, I don’t.”

“And to think you didn’t want aliens on the Normandy, Ash.” Krysta picked up on their banter. She stopped as they were about a half mile away. The whole situation didn’t settle right with her. “I’m pretty sure we are on their radar already.”

“Any cameras to wave to?” Ashley stopped alongside her.

“I feel like a sitting duck out here.” Krysta growled in aggravation.

“Well, if they see us, then may as well say hello, right?”

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“Sir, Alliance shuttle inbound hit our perimeter.” The news from the soldier didn’t alarm Jones at all. In fact, the whole situation that was about to unfold was already planned out in his mind.

With his hands cupped behind his back, Jones glanced up at the monitor. He saw Shepard and her team approaching the bunker. “Natalie, is the Batarian prepped?”

The woman to his left in the room nodded her head. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He looked over at Avery. The young woman was standing near the back of the room out of the way, holding her arms, looking terrified. “Don’t be scared, Avery. Now is your time to shine.”

Avery looked at the screen. “Am I going to be armed? I mean, what if Shepard turns on me?”

Jones chuckled and walked over, handing her his pistol. “Take mine. I don’t think your good friend would shoot you. Though, do not be quick to pull the trigger. She will have two others that are armed.”

Avery shook as she held the gun. “I will be by myself?” She gulped slowly.

“Of course not.” The smile remained on his face as he watched two of his soldiers drag Bray’s unconscious body down the hall towards the front of the bunker. He returned his attention back to her. “I’ll signal for you to make your entrance. I’ll come in if things get bad. She’s your friend. You can make her come to her senses. Now go get in position.” He waited until she was out of the room before hitting his omni tool to connect to the Illusive Man. “She’s here.”

Surprisingly, the Illusive Man wasn’t on the other end, but instead Kai Leng. “Deal with her.”

“Where is he?” Jones was caught off-guard by not seeing his boss’ face instead.

“He had to undergo a procedure. He’s recovering now but asked me to keep him up to date on the current situation.” Kai Leng disconnected the line. He was always a man of short words: blunt and to the point.

Jones looked down at his omni, trying to decipher the facts that had been given to him. What procedure was the Illusive Man foregoing? He never did like reporting to Kai Leng. He and the other operative never been placed together as a team. Both worked differently. Leng was more of a solo guy, while Jones loved to get others do his dirty work until it was time for him to get involved. He was aware of the minor distraction and lost sight of Shepard on one of the screen. Panicking, he
looked at the other monitors and then relaxed when another camera caught her at the door. “Show

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The entrance door to the bunker whisked open and no one was on the other end to greet her and the
others. Shepard kept her guard up. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck rose in anticipation of an
ambush. She kept her finger on the trigger as she slowly eased inside. Her right hand signaled for
Garrus to take her right flank while her left hand motioned Ashley take left. She could their breathing
as no other sounds were heard except for the gentle humming of machinery. The minor entranceway
opened into the center of the bunker: A wide-open room that was pretty much most of the square
footage. In the middle was Bray’s unconscious body lying on the ground. His hands and legs were
not bound, but his face was turned away from her, so she couldn’t tell if he was breathing or not.
There was no blood on the floor. She held her breath as her eyes transfixed upon him. She severely
wanted to run to him, but that was completely suicide. Only a newbie would fall for that. Using the
scope on her rifle, she moved the barrel around to check out any potential ambush sites. A stairway
was to the left that led up to an upper level and there was an overlook platform that clearly could be a
good place for a sniper. She allowed herself to turn her head to look back at Garrus. “Watch that
platform.”

Garrus turned on his heel to move around to back up along with her, keeping his rifle barrel aimed at
the target. “You got it, Commander,” he whispered.

Pushing ahead, Krysta darted over to where Bray was and knelt beside him. She reached over and
checked his pulse. “He has a pulse, but it’s faint.” She kept her voice low as she gently nudged him.
“Bray? Bray, I’m here.” He didn’t move, and she noticed his breathing was shallow.

“He’s been drugged. Sick bastards.” Ashley reported as she took to his other side. She rolled him
onto his back displaying his facial wound.

Krysta gritted her teeth as she saw that he had been injured. She remained calm and pulled up her
medic program on her omni. She was no doctor, but the program would at least give a quick
diagnosis. Treatment would not be up to her. Using the omni, she slowly moved her tool across his
body and waited for it display the results. A quick beep and the data was shown. “Two healing rib
simple fractures, minor pulmonary contusion, facial edema and a concussion without any subdural
hemorrhage.”

“You know what, Commander?” Ash whispered over to her. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I
feel sorry for this guy. Must have taken a few hits.”

“And then some.” Krysta gingerly touched his face and then rose back up from her knelt position
and looked around. “Where’s Avery? Why would they leave him out like this?”

“Shepard! To your right!” Garrus called out to her.

Krysta spun to that direction and kept her barrel poised at the door that connected with the room. A
figure was coming into view and when she saw who it was, Krysta lifted her head away from the
scope in disbelief. “Avery…?” The woman was wearing a Cerberus operative’s uniform and there
was pain and hurt all over her face as she stared right back at Shepard in horror.

Avery saw the security footage of Krysta tending to Bray as soon as she entered the room. She could
see how concern she was of the Batarian’s wellbeing and it proved what Jones and Kai Leng did
state to her. Shepard was no longer on humanity’s side. Jones nudged her for go on to make her
grand entrance. She checked her pistol at her side and then walked out. Stage fright was starting to
become her, and she nearly froze when she saw that she was on other end of Shepard’s rifle. Would
her friend shoot her? She prayed that she would listen to reason and dismiss whatever ties she had with the aliens and come back to her own kind.

“Shepard, she’s armed.” Ashley didn’t flinch from her trigger as she kept her weapon pointed squarely at Avery.

Krysta narrowed her eyes at her friend’s new attire. “She wouldn’t shoot me, Ash, even if she is with them,” She spat coldly as she straightened up and slowly lowered Ashley’s barrel down to take the bead off Avery. She didn’t bother to look at Garrus who was still in his position. “Garrus, keep her in your sights. If she goes for her weapon, shoot her.”

Avery’s eyes became wide with fright and the instinctive nature of survival kicked in. She looked from Garrus back to Shepard. “Krysta! I would never harm you!”

“Yeah, right. You’re with Cerberus,” The name of the organization dripped off Shepard’s tongue like acid.

“So were you!” Avery defended her choice. “Ever since the day I met you on the Citadel, I admired you. You were my idol.”

“I didn’t have a choice. I was dead!” Krysta spat angrily.

“I didn’t have a choice either!” Avery shot back.

“Bullshit.”

“You put me in that position.”

“Me?” Krysta scoffed. “How so?”

“By siding with them…” Avery motioned to Bray’s unconscious body. “I heard that you killed civilians on Omega to help Aria gain her control. Those were good people, Shepard. I had friends on that level!”

“People die in war. In perfect reality, there would be no causalities. If I didn’t shut down the reactor, then Cerberus would have kept their hold on the station and more people would have died. Blame them for their lives.”

“Why are you helping out the aliens so much? Earth is suffering, and human colonies are being hit by the Reapers. Why are you caring so much about other species?” She motioned back to Bray. “Why him?!”

“Their lies really got to you, Avery.” Krysta shook her head. “I thought you were stronger than that.”

“Look around you,” Ashley joined in their debate. “The aliens are helping us. We need to help one another. “

“As for Bray, “Krysta jumped back in. “That is my own damn business,” She spat coldly. “I do not have to answer for all my decisions.”

Seeing how far gone her friend was and how defensive she was, Avery felt hurt and betrayed. Her eyes watered up. She couldn’t make any sense to her. She needed help. She quickly glanced back at the doorway, wondering where Jones and her backup was. Did he abandon her to face Shepard and her team alone? Avery could not take them on. Krysta picked up on her sudden glance and raised her guard once more. “Your friends hiding?” She chuckled. “Typical. They are using you, Avery. Don’t
listen to their lies. I need to get Bray out of here. He needs medical attention. Are you coming with me or not?"

Avery tensed up and she slowly lowered her right hand down towards her pistol. She quickly recoiled and jumped when she heard a bullet whizzing by, striking the floor a foot away from her. Ghost faced, she looked at the direction of where the strike came from. Garrus didn’t flinch and kept his sights on her. “That was a warning shot,” He stated.

“Well, this didn’t go as planned.” Jones entered coolly in the room, accompanied by a group of seven soldiers that spread out behind him. “You are tough, Shepard. No wonder the Illusive Man was so adamant to resurrect you after the Collectors killed you.”

Krysta held her weapon at him, while looking at each soldier. Ash held her gun at the soldiers on the left and Garrus moved to her right to take on the others. “You finally showed yourself. You going to let Avery do your dirty work?” She could tell that this guy had strong kinetic barriers and appeared to be some type of vanguard class. She didn’t know what his biotic level was in comparison to hers, but she had to anticipate that he was stronger than her.

“Hardly,” Jones smiled at her. “I wanted to simply kill you for your treachery. Avery was hoping to speak some sense into you. The Batarian…well he was just the bait.”

“You bastard,” Krysta hissed. “You sent Sh’sk to his demise and you beat up Bray.”

“The Batarian that was sent to Sanctuary had no purpose in our plan. We believe in not being wasteful.”

“You turned all those people on Sanctuary into husks! You are no better than the Reapers!” Ash growled.

This didn’t faze Jones as he dismissed her with his hand. “I had no involvement in that. Our good friend, Henry Lawson, was doing the research.”

“And he’s dead. I shot him. I can assure you that you’re not walking out of here alive.” Krysta held her gun tighter to her.

This made Jones laugh. “You lost to Kai Leng before, Shepard. I’m ten times the fighter that he is.”

Garrus remembered what kind of foe they dealt with on Thessia at the temple. Kai Leng kicked their asses even if he had an assault ship for backup. “Spirits, I hope he’s joking,” He whispered to Krysta’s right.

A slight groan from Bray grabbed Krysta’s attention. His body stirred a little as the effects of the drugs were wearing off. Jones also noticed. “This is fitting, Commander.”

“What is?”

“Mindoir. Batarian raiders hit this place hard. They savagely took the colonists into slavery. Do you know what they did to the poor women and children? I have seen the reports. The women were raped, the men and children were placed into eezo mines. Is that the kind of species you want to support? This is our chance, your chance, Shepard, to take our revenge. To give the families some sort of payback for what was done to their loved ones.”

“Not all Batarians were doing this. Our history hasn’t made us out to be saints either. Should I
educate you on this?” Krysta was getting tired of the debate she was having with him. Their time was lingering longer than she expected at the bunker. What was this guy’s motive? Was he there to simply talk her to death? He almost reminded her of Oleg. She moved her attention over to Avery, who was standing to the side, quiet and listening to the entire conversation. “Avery, is this the trash he has been telling you?”

Jones narrowed his eyes as his hate stated to get the better of him. He couldn’t believe that the savior of humanity and the prize that the Illusive Man held in such esteem honor was choosing the Batarians over innocent human lives. How could anyone in their right mind jump to their defense? The idea had to be a farce. “Do you remember Elysium, Commander? You remember when the pirates struck hard during the Skyllian Verge?”

Krysta picked up on his heightened tone. This guy was becoming unstable. She feared for Bray’s imminent safety. With him drugged heavily, there was no way to defend himself if a fight broke out. Jones had to be the one who inflicted the harm upon Bray. This made her want to make sure he was not going to leave this place alive. She wanted to send the Illusive Man a message and this guy was going to be part of it. If she started to harness dark energy, he would pick up on it, being a biotic himself. She had to get him to keep talking in hopes that Bray would come to and at least be able to get to safety. “I remember Elysium. I was part of the team that struck Torfan in retaliation.”

Jones glared at her angrily. “So was I, Lieutenant.” He broke from his Cerberus persona and now the personal matter was coming into play.

Her former title made her study him closely. She didn’t recognize him at all. “You weren’t there,” she shot back.

“Oh, but I was, Shepard.” Jones’ chest heaved slightly. “I went by the name of Private William Masters.” He saw her facial expression widen as he recalled her memory. “Yeah, my features have changed. I remained off the grid after joining Cerberus. New face and new name: Jones.”

Hearing that these two knew each other and this seemed more now of a personal vendetta that Jones had for Shepard, Avery started to slowly step back. What did she get herself into? Ashley stared at Jones incredulously. “You were with the Alliance and you turned your back on us? You damn bastard.”

“No!” Jones snapped back at her. “The Alliance turned its back on me and humanity. The pirates had their way when they hit the Verge and we had to be soft to the Batarians. Sure, we handled them, but—”

“You maliciously stabbed a surrendered Batarian over and over until there was no way to identify him.” Krysta admitted to what she knew about Masters.

“He was the god damn enemy!”

“He was a prisoner! He surrendered among others and you didn’t stand down.”

“If we turned our backs on them, -”

“We were given a direct order. You were dismissed with dishonorable discharge.” Krysta fumed. “You should have been in the brig.”

“I would gladly do it again. I joined Cerberus and was able to give humanity the restitution it truly deserves. They gave me a new identity and I was able to take out numerous terrorist cells among the Traverse…my way.”
“Brutally.”

“Don’t be such a hypocrite, Krysta.” Jones rolled his eyes. “You were ruthless back then and you are still are as a Spectre. How do you like the power to deliver justice the way you want and not worry about any repercussions?”

“I have changed, Jones.” Krysta argued.

“Yeah, the aliens have softened you. You are not fit to lead humanity to its glory any longer.” He raised his rifle and aimed it at her. “You think the war cannot be won without you? Hah. Cerberus will take the lead. We will do it right.”

Bray groaned lightly from the floor and he slowly raised his head to look up at her. His groggy appearance meant that the drugs were not fully out of his system yet. It could be hours till he was at one hundred percent. “Krysta?”

“Easy, Bray. Move towards me.” Krysta gently encouraged him as she kept her weapon poised at Jones.

“Listen to your friend, Shepard. This vermin,” He moved in and swiftly kicked Bray in the upper belly as he crawled towards Shepard. “He should be dead or dissected!” Bray let out a wail of pain as he collapsed to the floor again into a fetal position. The wave of pain from the aggravated broken ribs soared throughout his body.

“Enough! Stay away from him!” Krysta engulfed herself with dark energy, electrical crackles could be heard around her body. She screamed loudly as she unleashed a biotic shockwave blast that was blocked by the sudden barrier that encased Jones and his team. The impact merely moved them back a few inches. Shepard gaped in astonishment from the lack of damage it caused.

“Fuck.” She could hear Ash huff under her breath next to her.

Jones grinned through the purple hue of the barrier. Avery, too, was on the other side of the divide. “Avery? You may want to avoid seeing this bloodshed. Get to the shuttle.”

Avery chewed her lip as she looked back at Krysta sadly. “Krysta…please...,” She urged.

“Avery.” Krysta turned her focus upon her. “If you leave this place with them, then you are the enemy. There’s no turning back from now.”

“Go to the meeting point. I’ll take the second shuttle after I’m done with this matter,” Jones called to Avery.

“I’m sorry, Shepard…I have to help my own race,” Avery’s voice quivered as she ran out of the room.

“Damnit!” Krysta glared angrily at Jones. She couldn’t believe that the war made her lose a friend to the enemy. Udina changed sides, but he was always an asshole to her and she didn’t care about him. Miranda and Jacob both left Cerberus after the war with the Collectors when they saw what the
Illusive Man was becoming. Now, it was her turn to lose someone to their side. She had to get Bray out of danger. There was only one way. She had to create a biotic barrier as well to prevent them from reaching them until they were able to get him out. Her implant most likely could hold it for a few minutes, but after the right hit, she could lose it. Where was Samara or Jack when she needed them? This was her only choice. Gathering more dark energy, she created the barrier side by side with Jones’. She then turned her attention to Ashley and Garrus. There was no room for error on her part. “Grab Bray and get him out of her.”

Ashley tapped her comm piece in her ear. “Cortez, we need pick up now!”

“On it!” Cortez’ prompt response came through.

“Commander, you can’t hold them alone.” Garrus looked at her worriedly.

“Get Bray to safety and get back here. I’ll hold them while I can.”

Garrus and Ashley gingerly lifted Bray up and carried him out of the bunker. Shepard kept her attention on Cerberus. “It’s over, Masters.”

“You think that barrier will save you?” Jones glared. “You are pathetic.” He signaled to his him.

“Take it out.”

The Cerberus soldiers opened fire, striking the barrier with fury. Krysta ran to take cover behind a column as seconds later, the barrier failed. The bullets now struck the column, chiseling away the sides. Krysta ducked as she tried her best to keep her body fully shielded. She then brought up her own kinetic barriers and moved around to return fire. She nailed one Cerberus square in the chest with her cryo rounds while freezing the upper torso of another, stopping him in place. That gave her enough time to duck back around the column, evading a hail of gunfire from the rest of the troops. She cringed and held her body tightly to the fixed object as the bullets flew all around her too close for comfort. “Give up, Shepard. You are outnumbered.” Jones called to her. “I will give you a better death than the Batarian on Torfan.”

Taking a breath, Krysta jumped back out and unleased a singularity attack that lifted two of the soldiers and killed them both with point on head shots. Their limp bodies fell to the ground in unnatural positions. Jones glared down at them in anger then looked Shepard’s way. He launched his own biotic shockwave. Shepard dove to avoid but was not completely out of its path. The dark energy hit her foot, sending her tumbling through the air and onto the ground. Her body slid onto metal floor away from the safety of her cover. Leaping back onto her feet, she rolled to the right and dashed towards the column as her kinetic shields were taking a pounding from the artillery since she was fully exposed. One of the bullets broke through her shields and tore into her right upper extremity. She cried out in pain and bit her teeth as she withstood the pain, taking refuge behind the column once more. Giving herself time to look down, she saw blood seeping out of the hole of her armor. “Damnit...” She panted.

The Cerberus operative held his hand out to stop his troops from firing. “Are you willing to die for the aliens? Shepard, you disappoint me.” Jones took note of her injury.

Shepard braced her head back against the column and panted hard. Her brown eyes gaze towards the door that Ashley and Garrus went through with Bray and then she turned her head to see the door that Avery went through. She had two outs and her shields were down. If she broke from cover, she was fully exposed. A part of her wanted to go after Avery and stop her from making a foolish decision. She couldn’t believe how deceptive Cerberus was, but then again, she almost believed what the Illusive Man fed her when going up against the Collectors. She was close to believing that no one else wanted to help humanity, but Cerberus. Thankfully, she later learned that was not the
case and her friends showed her the light. Either way, she couldn’t just stand there and let them keep her pinned. Checking her clip, she noted that she had ten more shots and then she would have to change out cartridges. She didn’t have time to do that in a midst of a firefight. Why was Jones letting up? Did he believe she had lost? “I seem to do that a lot lately,” Shepard called back to him, answering his question. Her eyes darted back to the door.

Just as she was about to make a flight to it, Garrus barged in with his rifle firing at rapid succession, catching Cerberus off-guard. Two of the soldiers fell from the hits. The remaining one returned fire. Krysta knew that Garrus really had nowhere to run. She had to assist. Stepping out from the safety of her cover, she squeezed the trigger and nailed that one in the leg. She then used her biotic ability to throw him straight into Jones, making him tumble to the floor.

Jones yelled as he threw the Cerberus soldier off him and looked at Shepard and Garrus in rage. The floor was littered with the dead bodies of his soldiers. This was not how he planned. Failure was never an option to him and now it seemed that Shepard got the best of him and Leng. Still, he wouldn’t leave empty handed. They had another loyalist to their cause. With a little more nudging, Avery could be an effective agent in the wars to come. He would take this loss personally and strive to turn every fiber of Avery against Shepard. He would get back at her another way for this humiliation. Extending her blade from her omni tool, Krysta charged at Jones. He remained calm and waited till she was about ten feet and hit her with another blast that pushed her hard into Garrus, knocking them both to the ground. “We will see each other again, Shepard.” He ran out of the door in the same direction that Avery went and initiated the lock behind him, preventing Shepard from tailing him.

Irritated, Shepard ignored her throbbing arm and raced to the door. The door wouldn’t budge and her omni tool was struggling to gain access. “Fuck! Where is Liara when I need her.” She punched the door hard with her left fist.

“He knows he lost. The Illusive Man won’t be happy with him.” Garrus stood where he was as he watched.

Krysta remembered the reason why she was there in the first place. She redirected her focus to her Turian comrade. “Bray?”

“Ash stayed with him to the Normandy. I’m sure Chakwas can patch him up.” His mandible twitched as he tried to find his next words. “Strange how wars seem to mess you up differently. This guy really lost it.”

“I wasn’t that far behind him after Torfan, Garrus,” Krysta admitted sadly as she winced and checked out her wound on her arm.

“Careful. You should get checked out yourself.”

“Just a scratch.”

“You did pretty well holding your own against them.” Her comrade noted as they walked towards the bunker’s door.

Krysta smiled up at him. “Well, I took some lessons from Archangel.”

This aroused a chuckle from the Turian. “I think he had you beat.”
Krysta Shepard and Bray are reunited. Avery meets the Illusive Man in person. Does he have the right idea about going things? Is Shepard doing it all wrong?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE: CHAPTER 39

Muffled noises stirred Bray from the darkness. Slowly opening his eyes, he shut them quickly from the room’s bright light. Turning his head to the side, he grunted as he slowly reopened them to allow his retinas to adjust. He couldn’t make where he was at first. It seemed like some sort of medical room with another bed beside him. He was shirtless and wireless electrodes were attached to various parts of his body for readings. He slowly sat up and felt a wave of nausea overpower him. Holding his head, he remained still to allow the sensation to pass. “Where the hell am I?” His head throbbed as the nausea persisted. He didn’t recognize the place at all. Was it another Cerberus facility? He recalled hearing Krysta’s voice and others talking, but was it all a dream?

“Good to see that you are fully awake this time. I was off by the estimation of the time duration, but it’s for the best.” A gray-haired woman approached him with a warm smile. He recognized that she was in an Alliance medical uniform, but he couldn’t figure out why. Was it all a trick? The Alliance wouldn’t care about his location and situation. His guarded stance made Dr. Chakwas gently touch his arm with her fingertips. “I assure you that you are in no danger. Shepard was lucky to find you when she did.”

He perked up. “Shepard is here?”

“Yes. I have already notified the Commander that you are awake. She will be heading down to see you.” She stood back and tapped her omni tool to retake the readings. “Your vitals are becoming stronger. That is a good sign.” Closing the omni, she smiled at him again once more. “I’m Dr. Chakwas of the Normandy. I’m the chief medical doctor.” She chuckled. “The only medical doctor onboard come to think of it.”

Bray looked down at his torso. The sensation of the electrodes on his body were becoming a nuisance. “Can I take these damn things off?”

“Sure. Pulling on the skin may hurt a little.” Chakwas soothingly said as she stepped closer. Bray didn’t give her the chance and began to rip them off himself, ignoring the pain as the tiny hairs on his body were pulled off by the sticky material on their backs. Becoming startled, Chakwas stepped back to allow him to continue.

Krysta noticed the scene when she walked in and smiled softly. “You will have to excuse the Batarian, Doctor. Their species have never been subtle.” She was dressed down in workout pants, a tank with her dog tags proudly displayed. Her own wounds from the fight patched up with their bandages showing.

Chakwas pondered the statement with her hand around her chin. “Come to think of it…I do believe
this is the first time I had to work on a Batarian on the Normandy. It’s been many years and I do feel I’m out of practice.”

“What’s his status?” Krysta remained where she was with her hands behind her back in a rigid military posture. Every fiber of being wanted to move to him and kiss him, but she fought back the urge. Right now, she had to keep things professional, but it was so hard. How could any alien make her feel so weak and vulnerable?

“I was able to flush out the remainder of the drug they were using for sedation. The nanites will help heal his fractures in a week. The bones are aligning great. No residuals from the concussion. He’s lucky on that. His facial abrasion will be completely clear in two days. I should be able to clear him once I confirm the fractures are healed.”

Krysta felt Bray’s warm dark eyes on her and she couldn’t stand it any longer. “May I speak with the patient, Doctor?”

“Of course. I’ll be right outside.” Chakwas politely excused herself from the room.

Once the doors closed, Krysta was up to him within seconds. Her mouth found his and she kissed him passionately, ignoring the fact that people inside the mess could look inside from the window. He returned the kiss just as deeply and discovered her tongue, tasting her, wrapping his arms around her back. Breaking from his mouth after a few seconds to come up from air, Krysta gently nuzzled his forehead with his. “Damnit, I thought I was going to lose you. Don’t make me fucking choose like this again.”

“You could have left me there.” Bray countered.

“And let them do what they did to Sh’sk. Not a chance in hell.”

Bray recoiled back, giving her a confused look. “What did they do to him?”

Krysta suddenly remembered that he had no idea what kind of fallout Sanctuary had and that his friend was shipped there. “Bray, I never been the one to sugar coat anything or dance around the details.”

“Tell me.”

“They turned him into a cannibal, a reaperfied Batarian creature. The same ones that the Reapers manufactured from the citizens of Khar’ Shaan. I had no choice, but to kill him and the others that were turned. I didn’t have time to look for a cure and I couldn’t put my crew in danger.”

“A Reaper?” Bray’s jaw dropped from the news and he looked away as he had difficulty processing the information. “It can’t be…” He breathed heavier as he relived the last memory he had of his longtime friend. He was in his cell while his friend was being dragged off to an unknown location. “Those sick fucks…Avery was in on it the whole time.”

“No.” Krysta shook her head. “Cerberus got inside her head and turned her against me. This was all a setup. I was too close to whatever they have planned. The Illusive Man didn’t like it.”

“If you were, why did you come back to get me?” He found her blue eyes once more. “I thought you cared about the war and saving your kind.”

“I care about everyone, Bray. Damnit, I’m not Cerberus. I was that way years ago, but I see things
differently. Traynor still has Kai Leng’s location pegged. We’ll head that way as soon as I leave here. Bray, I didn’t want to lose you.” His deep brown eyes caused her to get lost and she found herself wanting to just escape the war with him. She was becoming tired of fighting. She was so close in losing him.

“I’m expendable.” Bray chuckled.

“Not to me. I love you,” She admitted.

Bray shook his head. “You don’t mean that. No strings attached, remember?”

“If I didn’t, I would let you rot down there. I have fallen for you, Bray. I had to make a choice and I decided not to lose another love one if I can help it.”

“Shepard…it’s not in my nature to love someone.” Bray thoughtfully mused. “My kind usually mate with each other or with Asari. Asari outlive us so why the hell bother? And female Batarians… well…they are bitchier than you,” He grinned.

“I’m bitchy?” Krysta playfully tossed back.

“Uh huh,” Bray grinned and leaned in and kissed her again. “Hell, I’ll give it a shot. I can learn to love you.”

Hearing him say that made Shepard’s heart flutter. “It’s a start. You can share my quarters with me…” She paused as reality smacked her. This wasn’t some crewmate who was loyal to her. Bray was one of Aria’s and as far as the Pirate Queen was concerned, he was lost property. He was always loyal to Aria and Omega. Would their love cease that? She debated if she should press the idea now or not. She had to know. Deciding to move forward, she took a step back to maintain her professionalism once more. “Should I have Traynor alert Aria of your safety? Omega is too far out of my way to take you there myself. Perhaps, she can arrange for a pickup at my location. I must move soon so I need a response from her right away.

Bray shook his head as he scooted himself up from the bed. “No. Not yet. I’ll stay here.

Traynor walked in with a frown on her face. “Er, sorry to bother you, Commander. A message came in from a Dr. Bryson on the Citadel. He says that he has information that will lead to a…um, a Reaper killer?”

Bray gave Shepard a quizzical look. “Reaper killer?”

Krysta took the datapad from Traynor to read over the material again herself. “He stressed that it was urgent. Damnit…I can’t lose the Illusive Man. Traynor, any update on the signal?”

“Surprisingly, it is still there in the same sector. I have flashed it every hour as you specified. No detection yet. You think it’s their main headquarters?” Her voice peaked with anticipation.

“Possibly. Hitting that would definitely piss them off,” Shepard contemplated. “It’s not like Kai Leng to remain stationary in one area so long. The quick bastard likes to jump around.” Krysta glanced back down at the pad again. “Okay, I’m stuck now. We go see this doctor and I may lose the Illusive Man and the catalyst.”

“I want to destroy Cerberus as much as you do, Shepard.” Bray offered. “What if a Reaper killer really does what the name suggests? Do we even need this catalyst you are talking about?”

“Good point, Bray.” Krysta handed the pad back to Samantha. “Traynor, tell Joker to head back to
the Citadel immediately. Keep constant surveillance on the signal. I want to know right away if it moves. I will have time to deal with the Illusive Man once I take care of the Reapers. Finding this thing may bypass them all together. We wouldn’t really need a catalyst and it may save more lives on Earth.”

“Right, Commander. I’m on it.” Traynor saluted.

“And help Bray with any requisitions he may need.” She smiled at her love. “Go walk the ship if you want. I need to check in with Hackett. I want to see if he heard of this Dr. Bryson.”

Avery wasn’t quite sure where they took her after she left in the first shuttle off Mindoir. It pained her so much to see how bad her friend turned. Why was Shepard so pressed to help the aliens and ignore her own kind? Avery started to wonder if the aliens’ hold on Shepard was the main cause to Earth being hit so hard. Maybe, Shepard’s lack of compassion to humanity was a huge factor in her family’s demise. Was she under some type of spell? Why was she like this? This was a total different woman than the one she met on the Citadel. Being on the station made Avery accustomed to seeing aliens, but she never put their needs over her own species. She had to admit that she was somewhat befuddled when she saw an alien on Shepard’s team at their first encounter, but she never thought much to it. It was a former C-Sec officer by the name of Garrus Vakarian. She had seen him a few times before when he was an officer and she never knew till after their meeting that he quit C-Sec to team up with Shepard. She just assumed that he was there to accompany her while she was there. C-Sec was ran by Turians at the time so how could Shepard simply refuse an escort? The Terra Firma party spoke of Shepard’s support during their rally she attended.

A man of Asian descent greeted her at the entranceway. He looked familiar, but she couldn’t recall his name. His stature terrorized her. “You Avery?” He asked.

“Yeah…” She sheepishly responded.

“He wants to see you.” The man’s head leaned to the right to indicate the direction. “Follow me.”

He?” Avery asked as she walked behind him, looking around to gather her surroundings.

“The Illusive Man.” Kai Leng noted her action and grinned. “Don’t bother trying to figure out where you are. There are no identification markings to give our location. Trust me, no one will know you are here.”

“I-I just don’t want to be followed.” Avery stammered as she felt herself blush from being caught. “Where’s Jones?”

“On his way.” Kai Leng didn’t bother to look back at her.

“Who are you?”

Kai Leng debated if he should divulge in his earlier ruse or not. If she found out that it was all a trick, would her loyalty to them remain? “My name is Kai Leng. You know who I am.”

“I do?”

“You knew me as Kyle,” He admitted as he finally looked back at her. His eyes covered up by a hi-tech facial apparatus. “That was a front to get you this far.”

Avery slowed her steps down as she felt her heart racing from the news. “This all a trick?!”
Kai Leng spun on his heel to face her. “Relax. Everything I said to you is true,” He lied. “I had to have a front to get past Aria’s people. They know who I am after dealing with another person of interest months ago. We didn’t see things…eye to eye.”

Avery remained where she was temporarily before she continued her steps to catch up to him. She had no love for Aria, so the statement made her relax somewhat. Kai Leng turned the corner into a darkened room and then shut the door behind them. Seconds later, the lights slowly came to life and the Illusive Man appeared in the center. His appearance was very alarming. His eyes were a bright shade of blue like she had never seen, almost mechanical. Wires were under his facial skin and some of the flesh was thin, revealing not muscles, but heavily connected circuitry. The same patches of circuitry traced down his arms, chest and legs that could be seen. Gasping loudly, Avery covered her mouth and moved back away in fright and pressed her back up against the closed door. “Oh my God…what are you…”

The Illusive Man smiled. “I know my appearance is not orthodox, Avery, but it’s the sacrifice I have taken to ensure the survival of mankind. Your past idol appears to not do this.”

Avery frowned from guilt. He was right. He was so right. She lowered her hazel eyes down to the floor unable to meet his. She thought for sure that Krysta would come to save her and listen to reason. Instead, she was compelled to the Batarian’s wellbeing and would allow her teammate to try to shoot her instead without hesitation. “I know I failed, sir..., er, master?” She looked up at him as she tried to figure out how to approach him.

This stirred a chuckle from Kai Leng, who was standing off to the side during the exchange. Illusive Man’s smile didn’t falter. “Sir is well enough, Avery. We are all equals. Civilization has evolved that far to say the least. We cannot fall back into monarchies and discord. I treat everyone with the respect that they deserve. We all fail; it’s how we learn that determines our paths. You and Jones caused the delay that I was seeking for my metamorphosis.”

“You’re...?” The statement threw off the young woman.

The Illusive Man chuckled. “I enhanced myself with Reaper technology after careful studies. My team has uncovered the various risks for the procedure and we have learned from our...failures.” His bright eyes glanced over at Kai Leng in the shadows with a hint of disappointment. “Shepard didn’t learn from Saren. Saren didn’t learn from his studies on Virmire. Synthesis is not the element here. Being one with the Reapers is not an option. He went too far. We went too far with Grayson. We are here to control the Reapers. To bend them to our will. If you go too far, you will drown. Shepard simply wants to destroy this technology. Why destroy it when we can use it for our advantage?”

The entire conversation was going over Avery’s head. She didn’t know too much of the Reapers’ capabilities other than that they had the power to turn beings into their own forces. Synthesis, destroy and control were foreign terms to her in their context. In general, she knew what the words meant, but some of the influential people had taken this to each direction. As the Illusive Man spoke, she felt drawn to his ideals, to his words. They seeped into her like soft whispers in the back of her mind. Tingles went up her spine. She said nothing and remained there, taking it all in. Control was the key, control was the only option. He was right, the Illusive Man was right. Shepard was going about this all wrong. She knew it! The whispers to her confirmed it. Shepard was the enemy.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Bray, James and Garrus get to know each other better while Shepard finds Dr. Garneau.
What lie does Garrus disclose to Bray? James revealed a lost love

Reference to Mass Effect: Paragon Lost

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 40

Sleep was foreign to Bray currently and so was staying on an Alliance vessel. Even during his younger years with the Hegemony, he never served on a ship. He hated to say it, but he somewhat missed Omega’s atmosphere. He yearned for the sounds of drunks walking the streets outside his apartment as they were coming back from the various clubs, and fights that broke out in the streets over petty things. The Normandy was so quiet that it almost made it unnerving. While Shepard was down at the Citadel, he remained in her quarters and kept to himself. He wasn’t there to make friends. That was not his forte. While he was there in own private confinement, he debated on using Shepard’s terminal to send a quick message over to Aria. He wondered how Omega was faring since he was gone. He was sure that the station was running without any huge damage from him not being there, but what did Aria think about all of this? Did she even care?

Their current location now was in the Caleston Rift cluster. The whole scenario didn’t set right with him. When Krysta came back from the Citadel, she disclosed to him what transpired on the station. Her contact, Dr. Bryson, was killed by his assistant in front of her own eyes, then he was amnesic to his action. Dr. Bryson and his cohorts were studying some ancient artifact that they believed was a link to a creature called the Leviathan. The name sounded familiar with him, but with Shepard’s limited information at the time, he could not be certain if the term he knew was one and the same. For now, he would hold that information. He rarely liked to talk about his past with the Hegemony. He wasn’t proud of it and part of the reason why he slipped off the homeworld in desertion. His years on Omega seemed to make his previous occupation a distant memory and he liked it that way. Krysta took two of her squadmates to a mining facility on an asteroid to locate a Dr. Garneau, who was friends with Dr. Bryson. Bray didn’t like how this was heading, especially hearing about what the assistant did. What was Krysta getting herself into? He decided against contacting Aria for now. He couldn’t just leave to Omega if given the chance now. He had to make sure of her safety.

Slipping back on his clothes, he decided to walk the halls and discover some more parts of the ship. Heading down through the second level, he overheard distant talking and laughing coming from the starboard side. Moving in closer, he came to a room that was setup for cards and a man and Turian were sitting across from one another with playing cards in their hands. The Turian’s stack of chips were higher than the man’s. Before he was able to turn back around sharply to avoid any contact, he heard the man calling to him. “Hey! Look who decided to come down? You want in?”

“Vega is losing,” The Turian pointed out with a grin. “He is hoping that someone else can lose for a while.”
“Gah, I don’t think so, Garrus. I’m just getting warmed up,” Vega dismissed the statement with his hand. “You know three card draw right?”

“Yeah, I know.” Bray slipped down in the seat between them and allowed Garrus to deal the cards to him and his chips. “What’s the bet?”

James grinned as he accepted a new hand from Garrus as well. “We’ll let the newbie decide that. I’ll go easy on you this first round.”

Bray lifted an eye ridge to his comment and grunted. “Fine. One hundred creds.” He tossed out his chips as he glanced at his hand.

James eyed him cautiously. “You really like to jump the gun don’t ya?” He tossed in his own chips. “Fine. I’m in.”

“I like his style.” Garrus did the same. He then peeked over his cards to Bray. “We were telling war stories.”

“Yeah, like the time I saved your ass on Menae.” James grinned at him as he reshuffled his hand.

Vakarian glanced at his hand. “Raising fifty.” He then chuckled, “I think you hit your head too many times, James. I saved you from the Brute.”

“The what?” Bray’s interest was grabbed. He tossed in his own chip to match the bet.


“Yet, we fought plenty more after that. “Garrus added. “James, you in?”

“Hold up, Garrus,” James grumbled as he sorted his hand again.

Garrus noted this. “You have a lousy hand again?”

“No way,” James laughed. “I’m going to smoke your ass.”

“You’re not too good at bluffing, are you?” Bray grinned at him, enjoying the banter between the two. Almost felt like home except he wasn’t sitting with Moklan and Sh’sk. Moklan was somewhere on Omega, most likely kissing Aria’s ass to take his spot and Sh’sk was a dead Cannibal corpse. The idea that he was dead really bothered him after he knew his friend for so long, but if he was placed in the same position as Krysta, he probably would have shot him too.”

James tightened his face as he stared down at his cards in deep thought then threw them down on the table in a groan. “I’m out.”

Garrus eyed Bray. “You really want to do this?”

Bray smirked at him as he tossed in another chip. “Hundred more.”

Garrus’ face falter from the move and he nervously glanced back at his hand. Shaking his head, he put his cards faced down. “Too rich for my blood. I fold.”

James’ jaw dropped. “You kiddin’ me, Vakarian?! Were you bluffing the whole time?”

Garrus sheepishly smiled back at him. “You couldn’t tell?”
“Argh,” James groaned. “I had two pair!” He then glanced Bray’s way. “What did you have? A flush?”

Bray grinned widely and showed his cards to them. “Nope. Nothing that would work. I was bluffing.”

Garrus chuckled. “Damn…you had me going.”

James groaned again. “I could have won!”

“Tough shit.” Bray accepted the chips from the table. “Need a handicap, human?” Garrus stifled his laughter from the comment.

The burly marine pouted with his arms crossed. “And to think I spoke up for you Batarians on Menae.”

“You did?” Bray asked.

“I think he called you ‘meat’,” Garrus recalled the memory.

“Meat?” Bray looked over at James for an explanation. “You wanted us as fodder?”

“No. I meant you are tough. Like the Krogan.” James explained as he kept his arms crossed.

“Uh-huh,” The statement was not convincing to Bray.

“I have to admit, I dealt with plenty of you on Omega while I was there-.” Garrus admitted, but then quickly stopped himself with a cough. “Whose deal is it?”

“Mine.” James scooped up the cards to shuffle them.

Bray noticed the brash marine gave Garrus a worrisome look. The mood just became tense in the room. He didn’t recall seeing much of Garrus on Omega; his comment was enigmatic. “When were you on Omega?”

Garrus cleared his throat again. “With Shepard…she went there to find Mordin when we went up against the Collectors. I miss the little guy.”

“Me too. Can’t believe he sacrificed his life on Tuchanka.” James added.

“He did cure the genophage. Never thought that would happen…at least not in my lifetime.”

Bray studied him and thought back to his encounter with Krysta on Omega when she was there under Cerberus’ orders. Aria had him tail her several times and this led to more interactions with her and the primary reason why ended up falling for her. Krysta first came to Afterlife to inquire about Mordin and Archangel with a man and a Krogan. Then later, when she went to find Mordin, she was with same man and a female Cerberus operative. He never seen the Turian with her. He narrowed his eyes from the lie and stood up from the table from the offense. “I’m out.”

“What? After one hand?” James gaped at him.

Bray turned his attention down at Garrus, who had guilt all over his face. “I know you guys don’t really care for me being here. You don’t have to tell me lies to pretend to like me. Shepard came to Afterlife with two humans to come for Dr. Solus at the clinic during the plague. You were never there, Turian.”
James pushed himself back from the table and threw up his hands. He seemed to know what Vakarian was hinting at. “Look, Garrus, just can’t say. Alright? Can we leave it at that?”

“What makes you so special?” Bray snapped at Garrus. “You have a contract on your head?”

Vakarian eyed James carefully and sighed. “You can say that.” His mandible twitched as he mulled over disclosing whatever facts he knew or not. “Look, Bray. I trust Shepard with all my life. She has pulled my ass out of the fire more than once. I know you and her…have a special bond with one another. I trust that you’re not going back to Omega any time soon and I’m going to trust you like she does.” He took a breath and then looked directly at him with his blue avian eyes. “I was Archangel.”

Bray scoffed. “I doubt it. Archangel was a pain in the ass. Every merc wanted a piece of him and still do if you ask them. They came to Aria whining about it.”

“Trust me. It wasn’t pleasure for me either. Cooped up in that warehouse for days. It took a lot of methodical thinking to rig up the lower level with explosives without being ambushed. Tarak almost had me.”

Recalling the name of the former Blue Suns Leader and his cry for help, Bray shook his head with a laugh. “Here I am playing cards with the legendary Archangel. No one really liked you on Omega…well except for its lower citizens.”

“Are you going to give Aria this information?” Garrus’ tone became more serious.

“Hell no,” Bray sat back down. “If they found out that I hung out with you and didn’t kill you, they would skin me even if Aria took me back. Hell, she may even trade me in for the right price.”

“Well that’s comforting,” James relaxed back in his chair with his arms behind his head, propping his feet up on the table, slowly pivoting the chair on one end. “Thinking that your boss would give you up so easily like that.”

“You don’t think Shepard would?” Garrus grinned at him.

“Maybe.” James stared up at the ceiling, deep in thought.

“Who went with her down to the mine?” Bray asked. Krysta really didn’t disclose her plans to him once she left to head to the armory.

“Liara and Tali,” Garrus answered.

James whistled, “All female squad. That would be something to see.”

Garrus lifted an eye ridge at him. “You do realize that technically the Asari are nongender, right?”

“Yeah, yeah.” James grinned as he sat back down.

Bray itched for a cigarette. It had been too long since he had one. “You got any smokes?”

“Can’t have them onboard.” James said. “I know a guy that can get you some cheap ones on the Citadel. That’s if we ever get back. Maybe I can place an order, so you can take them back with you when you head to Omega.”

“I’m not going back. At least not right now. Aria doesn’t know I’m here.” Bray explained.

“When you clear for duty?” James inquired.
“Your doctor said two more days. Why?”

“I so get dibs with you on next mission.”

This aroused a chuckle from Garrus as he sat there, listening in to their conversation. “A Batarian squadmate? Thought I would never see the day. It’s not cleared by the Alliance.”

“You think the Commander cares?”

“Touché.”

“I don’t think the Alliance approved Javik and look how much ass he kicks.”

“He’s very dreary.” Garrus shrugged as he restacked the cards.

“You would too if you woke up fifty thousand years later and find out all your family and friends are dead, and you may be fucked.” James picked up a chip and looked at it for a second as he dropped the subject. “Going back to what we said previously, you know the Asari?” A sly smile slowly moved across his lips.

Garrus shook his head. “You know Liara hates when you start to bring up her species’…. attributes.”

“She’s not here, Garrus.” James shot back, his smile disappearing. “I’m just saying. We’re all males here. Guy talk.”

“What?” Bray asked.

“You know...men. Have you ever been with an Asari?”

“No,” Garrus quickly replied. The topic seemed to make him uncomfortable and he fidgeted a bit in his chair.

“Six or seven times,” Bray shrugged.

Garrus’ eyes became wide in astonishment to the Batarian’s response. “Six or seven?”

“Mostly entertainers on Omega. Could be more than that.” Bray looked over at James. “You, human?”

“It’s James.” Vega corrected him. “You can call me that. I never did...I was in love with Treeya once..., but that was long ago.”

“Oh?” Garrus perked up in his seat. “You never told us about this, James.”

“I didn’t think I had to,” James snapped defensively. “Hard to talk about.”

“What’s so special about her?” Bray grinned. “She went for someone else? Hurt you?”

“Don’t think so. Treeya and I dealt with a mess on Fehl Prime...a colony that was lost to the Collectors. I made the wrong decision.” He furrowed his brow as anger consumed him. “I….” He huffed and stood up quickly. “I still lost her.” He stormed off quickly leaving Garrus and Bray sitting there in bewilderment.
“What’s up his ass?” Bray asked the Turian’s compatriot.

Garrus shrugged this time. “Beats me.”

“Shepard’s shuttle inbound. T minus twenty minutes.” Joker’s voice popped over the PA system.

“Good,” Bray stood up from his seat.

Garrus did the same. “Hopefully some good news. I’m ready to end this war.”
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Krysta Shepard is on the hunt for the Leviathan. Is she going too far to get it? Bray connects with Aria. Is she willing to take him back? Will he return to Omega?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 41

Bray couldn’t recall what time Krysta snuck back into her quarters while he was sleeping. He woke up to see her sleeping softly beside him. Her hair tickled his nostrils as her head rested on his bare chest. Seeing her there peacefully made him smile as his fingers became lost in her hair, tracing down the strands. Soft murmurs coming from her made him quickly remove his fingertips. Her eyelids flickered open as she got her bearings and then smiled as she looked up at him. “Hey, Bray,” Krysta softly nuzzled his chest, feeling the warmth of his flesh against her. Her body yearned for his, but it was not the time and place. Not when they were heading to Desponia in the Psi Tophet system. She was so close in finding Leviathan. A way to finally destroy the Reapers and not deal with Cerberus. She would take it. Avery’s betrayal still pained her.

“You find that thing yet?” Bray asked as he gently moved his hand down to the small of her back, rubbing softly.

“Not yet. It thinks it can evade me,” Krysta narrowed her eyes. “It’s damn wrong. I’m tired of it hiding and using enthrallment links to innocent people. It’s no better than a Reaper.”

“Enthrallment…what? What the hell is that?”

“This Leviathan has a way to almost indoctrinate through its artifacts. It caused Dr. Bryson’s murder and because of its hold on his daughter, she may suffer permanent brain damage.” Krysta rubbed her face as she moved up from the bed slowly and held her knees to her chest in comfort. “I had to push Ann’s connection to the max to find its exact location. I was tired of its games.”

“Indoctrination? Leviathan?” Bray moved his eyes down as he thought back to what he knew of the same terms. This whole line of events was troubling. Was it coincidental that this creature had the same name as the Leviathan of Dis? He gulped slowly as he began to remember the news reports that flooded from Khar’ Shaan and the horrors that were inflicted on its inhabitants by their own kind prior to the Reapers’ arrival.

Krysta caught on to his troubled expression. “What is it, Bray?”

“Do you know of the Leviathan of Dis?” He finally met her eyes as he prepared himself mentally to share more of his closed off past.

“Few details years ago, but I discovered a datapad in Bryson’s lab. It was a communication from the officers of the Hegemony. They tried to hide their findings from the Council and study the artifact selfishly. They called it- “
“Leviathan of Dis,” Bray finished for her. “It was discovered by the Batarians twenty years ago. It was brought into the Hegemony to study to further advance ourselves beyond the other races.” He scoffed. “Heh, turned out that all the top officials involved in the project were indoctrinated. They then turned on others, killing them in cold blood, dropping our defenses and allowing the Reapers to run over Khar’ Shaan.”

Krysta gaped at him for sudden disclosure. “I knew you were in on the Hegemony, but I didn’t know you were on it. You could have told me,” She hissed, feeling hurt by his hiding.

“I wasn’t on the official team,” Bray answered calmly. “Everyone on the Hegemony knew about it. I didn’t like it from the start, but not my department. A few months after its discovery, I bailed the Hegemony and went to Omega.”

Krysta sighed again and ran her fingers through her hair. “I shouldn’t get so offended. Hackett seemed to be working with Bryson and providing grant money for his research without telling me. I don’t like to be kept in the dark. I always told Anderson that. Too bad it stopped there.”

“Is this thing really worth it?” Bray’s voice softened as he looked upon her with worry. He didn’t like the idea that she was going after the very thing that could have demised his entire race. What if this was an actual lone Reaper toying with her? What if she became its thrall? What if she already was and didn’t realize it? The adjutants on Omega changed many people he knew and thankfully, he wasn’t there to be the one to put them down. Aria took down Anto herself. What if he was the one who discovered Sh’sk on Sanctuary? It was easy to say with confidence that he could pull the trigger on his longtime friend without hesitation but saying it and doing it were two different things. What if she turned on him? Could he do it? “You sure it won’t overtake you either?”

“I have dealt with Reaper tech for the past few years, Bray. I know how to be careful.” She paused and chuckled. “Then again so did a lot of people I knew who let themselves be indoctrinated like Dr. Amanda Kenson. I’ll be careful.”

“Uh huh,” Bray sat up and clasped her hand with his warmly. “You are always stubborn.”

“Is that what turned you on?” Krysta cooed as she squeezed his hand.

“No,” Bray smirked at her. “I think your bad ass attitude did it for me.” He leaned and gently kissed her lips.

Krysta sucked on his bottom lip before pulling away from the kiss. “You tease.”

“Me?” Bray laughed. “You’re the one who came in this bed naked,” He churred as he let his hand slowly wonder towards the front of her body.

“This is my quarters after all,” Krysta swatted his hand away playfully and then swung her legs out to the bed’s edge. “Duty calls. We should be hitting planet side soon.”

“Ever been there?” Bray’s eyes followed her.

“No. Don’t know what I will expect, but it better be Leviathan.”

“What if it doesn’t want to help you?”

“It won’t be given a choice.”
Later that day after Krysta’s departure to Desponia with James Vega and Garrus to seek out Leviathan, Bray moved into the war room. The Alliance officers on duty eyed him cautiously. None addressed his presence and remained rigid at the ready. Bray could feel the tension in the air. “Chill. I’m just using the communications hub to make a call out. I won’t be gone long.” The two looked at one another to see if they could clear the action or not. Bray groaned. “I won’t break anything.”

Finally, the male officer spoke up, his voice quivering, “Did the Commander approve this?”

“You can ask her that when she gets back.” Bray moved ahead towards the communication room. He already asked Traynor to get him dispatched to Omega since they were near a communications buoy despite their location. They were just outside Desponia’s orbit. On his way down, he debated whether to make the call finally to Aria to let her know of his whereabouts. He didn’t disclose his intention to Shepard. It would be something that they could address when she returned. He didn’t know how the conversation would go between he and the Pirate Queen. He almost imagined her not pleased knowing that he was with Shepard and nowhere near Omega. Still, he had to let her know. A voice crept in the back of his mind. “What if she wants you back?” The voice softly called to him. “What will you say?” He felt like he was out of place on the Normandy, yet he was confident in his choice to stay by Shepard’s side. Still Omega compelled to him.

Almost ready to end the transmission call, the connection was established and Aria’s holo figure stood a few feet before him. “Where the hell have you been?” She didn’t look too pleased. Her arms were crossed, and her face was tight with resentment. She didn’t let him answer the question, before tacking on, “I knew Shepard was deceitful. I never trusted her.

“Cerberus took Sh’sk, Avery and I from Omega. They used me to get Shepard’s attention. I guess you heard about Sh’sk.” He noted in the distance that Moklan was standing proudly, almost boasting his stature. She replaced him after all. He decided not to bring this up. When he returned, he would address it personally. He knew the Batarian was always after his position. Ambition ran like blood in the streets.

“I did.”

“Avery is with them.”

“Who?”

“Cerberus.”

“I knew there was a stench still among this place.” The news didn’t disturb her. She then uncrossed her arms. “I should give Shepard my thanks for freeing one of my people from Cerberus, but I see you have made no effort to return here. How long have you been with her?”

Bray shrugged. “A week. Cerberus kicked the shit out of me. A few fractured ribs.”

Aria rolled her eyes, unimpressed. “Are you asking me for my sympathy, Bray?”

“No.”

“When should I expect you back here on duty?” Her voice was dry.

Leave it to Aria to cut to the chase. She was an Asari of a few words. Her blue eyes stayed on him, waiting for his response. Her icy glare made him feel uncomfortable. It was the moment of truth. “When this is over.”

“When?” Aria demanded. The wording was too vague for her. “Your present…’mission’? Shepard’s
“It’s not little. It’s much bigger than you think, Aria.” Bray found his voice as he spoke up defensively. “You know what Cerberus is doing to others…you heard about Sh’sk.”

“I did hear. So, what of it? They have been purged from my station, Bray. Are you too scared that they will find you?”

“Getting off Omega opened my eyes.” For once in his life, he wasn’t going to back down to her. He needed to get the pressure off his chest. “The Reapers will hit there soon if we don’t stop them, Aria.”

“Pfft.” Aria dismissed the statement with her hand. “Now you are preaching like her. I gave her eezo and ships to deal with her war. It should be enough. I can’t spare anymore.” She lifted her eye ridge. “Is what you plan on doing, Bray?”

“What?”

“Going to Earth with her. Fighting by her side against the Reapers. What is she paying you?”

“Nothing. I might.” He snapped back.

She picked upon his tone and grinned. “Touchy subject I see. Did she use her body to manipulate you? Just like you did to her.”

Bray clenched his fists and he growled lowly. “She’s not using me.”

“Fine. You’re going to war with her. Good to hear.” Aria cut him off sharply. “Are we done with the purpose of this call?”

Bray felt his body untense as her cold demeanor seemed to bother him. Was this goodbye? After all his years of servitude and she would simply be rid of him so quickly? “Wait, Aria.” He stammered.

Aria smiled as she looked back at him. She had him hooked and he knew it. His jaw dropped as he realized he walked into her little trap. “Something else, Bray?”

“Once the war is done, I’ll head back to Omega.”

“You really think that Shepard will give you up?” Aria played into this. “You love her, Bray?”

Bray feverishly shook his head. “No. I’m too far now to get to Omega.”

“Where are you now?”

“Psi Tophet system.”

“That far out?”

“Hitting Cerberus next. Thought you may want to know.”

“The Illusive Man?”

“Hopefully.”

“She will let you go with her?”
“I plan on asking it. I’m doing better now.”

“Make sure to send the Illusive Man my regards then. You know the kind of message I want to send.”

“I do.”

“And Bray?”

“Yeah?”

“Stay alive.” Her words still echoed in his head as the connection dropped off. He could almost see a faded image of her face still looking at him. Feeling angry with himself for giving in so quickly, he growled and punched the wall with his fist then recoiled quickly as his fist throbbed with pain. The impact broke his skin apart, blood dripping out. The saturation in the air made the exposed wounds sting. He scowled as he looked down at his newly injured fist. He couldn’t just leave Shepard when this was over. Could he? What did she expect for their relationship?
Krysta Shepard makes the final push to Cronos Station. How does her team like the idea of the new squadmate? Avery is moved to Noveria.
“The Citadel?” Avery’s eyes became wide as she finally recognized one location in their conversation. “Why? What’s there?”

Growling through his teeth, Kai Leng shoved her up the loading ramp. “Get going.”

Avery sniffled as she fought back her tears, looking down at him, before she turned to go inside the shuttle. She meekly looked around and saw a young woman at the controls, doing the final prep checks. “Hello.” Avery called to her as she slowly approached.

The woman appeared to be around Krysta’s age with a softer appearance. Most likely, she never seen combat. “Hello. We will be departing shortly. I’m going through the checklist now.”

“Why is everyone in a hurry?” Avery asked as she stood by the cabin door.

“Ramp enclosed, Alexandria.” A male called from the passenger cabin behind Avery.

“Thank you, Roger. T Minus five minutes.” Alexandria didn’t bother to glance away from her work to answer him. She settled against the pilot chair and glanced at the readings. “Everything checked.” She finally looked up at Avery with her green eyes. “Kai Leng screwed up.” The statement seemed to be private humor to the woman as she giggled. “Can’t really stand him. His fault. He stayed too long on Sanctuary, chasing down Miranda. I couldn’t stand her either, but he let himself be tracked.”

“Tracked?”

“Yeah, he had a tracker on him. His arrogance made him forget to do the self-check before arriving here. Seems he has been giving our location away. Most likely, it’s Shepard. If it was Miranda, she would be here right now. Coward.”

Avery perked up by hearing her friend’s name. “Shepard? She’s coming here?” She tried to think of some way to keep her on the station as she spoke with the woman. She had to give Krysta another chance.

“Who the hell knows,” Alexandria shrugged. “She hasn’t shown up yet. The Illusive Man didn’t want to risk it since we are too close now. He left for the Citadel and now we are moving to different outposts to keep the organization going until he is done with his mission. Noveria has a hazard label for being cold. Linger out too long, even with your suit, and you will freeze within minutes. Peak 15 is well preserved, so we will be safe there. Our front has fooled Port Han ‘Shan’s executive board. No Reaper activity near that planet yet. We are well bunkered below the surface, so we are safe even from a Reaper attack. Port Han ‘Shan won’t be though. Tough luck to them.” She smiled as she eased back into her seat. “All set to launch. You better go find a seat, Avery.”

Avery bit her lip as the lost for time crept up on her. She moved to an empty chair beside the man that spoke with Alexandria a few minutes ago and strapped on her harness restraint. She gripped it so tightly that her knuckles turned white. She didn’t like the idea of where she was being moved to. “First shuttle launch?” The man asked, picking up on her physical appearance. “You look a little peaked.”

Avery shook her head solemnly. “Noveria doesn’t sound too pleasant.” She thought back to what she was told so far about this place. “What are Rachni?”

The man chuckled. “Big giant bugs.” He grinned as he saw Avery’s eyes widened with even more fear. “Relax. They are dead. Shepard killed them years ago along with their queen.”

“What would Cerberus study bugs?”
The man shrugged. “I’m not a scientist, I’m just guard backup. Who knows. I guess we will both find out when we get there.” The news was not comforting to Avery and she tightly shut her eyes and breathed through her mouth loudly as she heard the shuttle’s engines coming to life. “It will be okay.” He called to her again. “The name’s Roger. I’m a good shot.”

“What if the Reapers get there?”

“What do you think?”

“Hope they don’t like the cold either.”

“Leviathan didn’t provide the intel we needed?” Hackett’s tired, withered appearance was still striking for a man of his stature. The holo vid captured his facial features perfectly as his blue glowing face stared at Krysta for the status report following her return from Desponia.

“It…reluctantly agreed to help. A few hours ago, we lost Kai Leng’s signal, but we still have the source. This may be our last chance to knock Cerberus off the playing field.” Krysta fought the urge to question why he funded Dr. Bryson without her knowledge until the matter became an elevated level of importance. She didn’t mind firing back at her superior officers if undisclosed details put her crew in jeopardy. She would have if the situation was different. She couldn’t squabble. Time was of the essence. They were at full power towards Cerberus’ location and this time, they wouldn’t get distracted. The Illusive Man had the advantage and certainly wouldn’t risk ignoring the possibility of them being found. Yet, their limited time may not give an opportunity to scramble all their resources away.

The admiral studied her face as he contemplated what she was telling them. His career history never placed him as a man that jumped right into a fight without knowing full well what he was walking into. He would play out each scenario in his head the best that he could; figuring out the domino effect. “Once we move the fleet, the Reapers will pick up on it. There’s no turning back.” A firm reminder of what she was asking him. They had to be fully committed to this cause of action. “This will be phase one of our plan to retake Earth. Are you ready, Commander?”

Krysta previously studied all their intel with Liara’s help and they had to go now. She accumulated all the support that she could. She lost Salarian aid by not giving into the Dalatrass and sabotaging the genophage cure for the Krogan. Wrex was her friend and Krogan infantry was crucial for this. Despite this loss, Kirrahe promised his STG men overriding the Dalatrass’ decision. She acquired ships from Aria, the Quarian and the Batarian Hegemony to bring to the fold on top of the Alliance’s numbers. This had to work. Earth needed her, Anderson needed her. “This is it, sir.” She held his stiff gaze.

“Then it’s a go.” The man didn’t pause to exhale. “See you on the other side, Commander. Hackett out.” The image fizzled before there was sheer blackness once more on the screen.

Krysta took a deep long breath to compose herself before moving up to her quarters. Once back, she noticed the emptiness of her room and glanced over to her desk where her helmet was located and the deserted spot of where her photo frame of Kaidan used to be. Seeking solitude before the fray brought back painful memories. Once more, she was at a point in her life where there was no guarantee she would come back alive. Taking her helmet, she sat down on the edge of her bed and ran her fingertips along the top ridge inspecting the damage that it endured after their last fight. The sound of her door opening made her look up to see Bray walking back in normal attire. Her heart fluttered as she saw him approach. Warmth overtook her. He was what she needed right now. “Bray…”

“What are you doing?” He asked as he walked down the steps to where she was.
“My helmet took damage from the previous battle. Nothing too bad.” She tossed it to the side. “Did Chakwas clear you?”

“Yeah.”

Krysta thought back to the information that she was given before Hackett’s call. Traynor brought to her attention that Bray made a call out to Aria T’ Loak. She cleared it, but she wanted to make sure the Commander was informed. “Aria will be glad to hear of it.” A sour taste was in her mouth as she eluded to the facts that she knew.

Bray cringed as he heard this. “Figured she would tell you.” He pointed out to Traynor’s full disclosure. “Nothing gets by you on your ship.”

“You went behind my back.” Krysta hissed with pain.

Bray growled and stood up quickly from the bed. “I had to.”

Krysta looked up at him, hurt. “I guess you want to go back to Omega.”

The Batarian looked over at her fish tank for a moment as his fists remained clenched by his sides. He hated the predicament he was placed in. Half of him wanted to return to Omega, back to his old life, while the other half wanted to remain on the Normandy. What drew him to Omega? A life of comfort? Fear of dying? He told Aria that he wasn’t returning, but was that completely true? He closed his eyes as he forced himself to make a final decision. “I’m not going back…”

The statement made Krysta stand up from the bed. “What?”

He finally turned around to look directly upon her with his mahogany brown eyes. “I’m staying here…with you, Shepard.”

“Bray…” The notion of the commitment somewhat scared Krysta. It was unexpected. She almost seemed to want the opposite. Was she afraid of this as well? “It will be hell going forward if you stay. I cannot guarantee your safety.”

He cracked a thin smile. “Omega with the adjutants was hell. That’s if your human hell is portrayed just as dark as my species’.” A beat. “I want to go with you to take out Cerberus.”

The request made Krysta laugh a little as she playfully contemplated it. “A Batarian squadmate? I wonder what Ashley will think.”

“Screw her.” He spat back in offense. “You know I can hold my own against those bastards.”

Krysta smiled and scooped his hands in hers, giving a light comforting squeeze. “I was only teasing. You Batarians really need to learn to relax.” She leaned and gently kissed his lips. “I wouldn’t mind seeing you in action again,” She whispered in his ear.

He chuckled and nuzzled her forehead with his own as he squeezed her hands back, feeling the warmth of her skin against his own. “You know what will be up against?”

“Have no clue. We can face it together.” Her tone changed to seriousness as she pulled back slightly. “What will happen once we defeat the Reapers?”

Bray took a breath. “I guess we take one thing at a time and see.”

The unspoken hint that they may not remain together seemed to not settle with Krysta very well. She
withdrew herself from him and moved towards her bed. “We should get some rest. Once we hit Cerberus, we go to Earth.”

Realizing his words were poorly chosen, Bray quickly caught up to her and wrapped his arms around her waist, gently pulling her back to him. He lightly placed kisses on her neck. The sensation created a tingle down her spine and she felt herself melting in his arms. “I want to stay in the bed with you,” He whispered softly into her ear, creating new shivers.

“If you stay here, I won’t rest,” Krysta teased back as she turned his head and met his lips with her own.

He kissed her back deeply. “I’m counting on it.”

Krysta pulled from his grasp and turned to face him with a grin. Catching him off-guard, she pushed him onto his back on the bed with a slight biotic shove. The sudden movement startled him, then he smiled up at her. “You bein’ rough this time?”

Krysta hovered over his body, letting her long hair flow down, tickling his face. “I thought you Batarians like it rough.”

“There it is.” Krysta eyed the large space station in the viewport as she stood behind Joker’s chair in full gear. Bray was down in the cargo bay getting prepped and loading the shuttle up with Cortez.

“Finally giving those bastards some payback.” Joker’s fingers dashed over the controls as he held back the Normandy’s throttle. “Good thing we are in stealth mode. The Alliance fleets are held back, and I don’t think I can outrun too many of their fighters.”

“You will be fine. You know what to do, Joker.” Krysta replied soothingly.

“You really trust him on this one?” The pilot’s tone darkened as he shot up to her.

“Who?”


“Bray,” Krysta icily corrected him. “Yes, I do. You have a problem with it, Mr. Moreau?” She kept her eyes on the viewport. Out of everyone on her ship, she didn’t expect he would be the one to question her choice to selecting Bray as her squadmate on the mission. Was it because he was still upset with EDI requesting to come along too? The idea of her old masters being that close to her didn’t sit well with the young pilot.

Joker groaned again in anger. “I want her safe, Commander. I mean, can he really fight? Why not James? Why not Garrus? Hell, why not the asshole Prothean down in Grunt’s old room?” His tone heightened by the sheer fear of loss controlled him.

“He can fight, Joker.” Krysta finally broke her attention away the viewport. The large dying sun on the back side of the station made the whole scene mesmerizing. “I have seen him. He saved my ass.”

She tried to cut him some slack, realizing the bond that he had with their AI. “I know she’s important to you, Joker. I’ll take care of her.”

Joker kept his eyes on the controls. “Understood, Commander,” He pouted. “God speed.”

Shaking her head as she knew she didn’t get through to him, she turned to head down to the bay
where the rest of her team was waiting. EDI already came through earlier to say goodbye to Joker. Krysta never thought anyone would be in love with an AI, then again, she never would have thought that she would be in love with a Batarian. The war seemed to change a lot of them. At least now, Cerberus would be dealt with and be wiped out of the picture in the hours to come. Her thoughts of Avery came back to her mind as she got inside the elevator. She almost forgot that her friend left on Mandoir to head off with Jones. Would she be there? Would she have to face her again? She wouldn’t mind another rematch with Jones and Kai Leng. Would they pit her against Avery? Could she truly pull the trigger on someone who was given false information? Avery did have the choice to stay. Krysta could have dealt with Jones on Mandoir and then she would have talked sense back into her friend. Why was she thinking the way she did? Why was she cold against her relationship with Bray? What was turning her away? There had to be something in her mind that Cerberus was using to ignite the wildfire they caused. She hoped that she could deal with the Illusive Man first. Take him out and Cerberus would fall like Rome in ancient times. The organization would be disorganized and fall into cells. She wouldn’t have to deal with their interference anymore until the Reapers were handled. If she managed to survive, she could then extinguish the rest of them like she did the Geth after Saren and Sovereign were handled. Thinking back to the time made her realize that it was shortly after that when she was killed by the Collectors when they ambushed the Normandy SR-1. Would it come full circle? Was this like the Butterfly Effect? Would she be doomed to fall once more into the void?
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Avery heads to Noveria and Krysta Shepard and her team hit Cronos Station. What will they find?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE:
CHAPTER 43

“EDI! Overload the damn turret!” Krysta screamed through the relentless hellfire as she was pinned down behind electrical pipes. The darkened utility room made visibility poor and the sound of constant gunfire made things unnerving. She lost sight of Bray and she knew EDI was to her left. It had been an uphill battle since they landed in the hangar and she expected no less when hitting the Cerberus nest. Not knowing where Bray was scared her, but she had to stay focused. One false move and she could get hit by a bullet.

She heard the AI launch an overload attack from her omni tool and then the satisfying sound of an explosion. The barrage ceased and there was momentary silence. She grasped at the few seconds window to find Bray hunkered down to her right about twenty feet back. He had taken refuge behind some crates. He gave her a thumbs up and moved towards her side.

Suddenly, she heard the dreadful sound of electrical sizzling and then the sharp pain as a bullet pierced into her left arm. Wincing, she grasped at her arm and ducked down. The mechanized chattering moved in closer. A Nemesis! “Shepard!” Bray ignored the danger he was in and rushed to take her side.

EDI moved to her other side. Now all three were taking cover behind the large stack of pipes.

“Are you alright?” EDI asked in her non-expressional voice.

“Easy, Bray.” Krysta clenched her teeth and moved her hand to inspect the damage. The bullet grazed the top of her arm and broke the skin but did not penetrate to inflict any muscular damage. She was lucky. “I’ll be fine.” She heard the Nemesis approaching along with the sound of more Cerberus troopers. “You think you can take that asshole out?”

Bray nodded and aimed his assault rifle as the Nemesis popped up from its own cover to fire once more. Squeezing the trigger, he nailed the Cerberus creation square in the chest, shattering its shields and tearing through its wiring. A horrible sound came out from its voice box before it exploded. Not letting his momentum down, Bray leaped over the pipes and charged at the oncoming troops. He yelled out as he kept his finger on the trigger, unleashing a deadly barrage of rounds, exhausting the clip. Hearing the click of the magazine being empty, he dove to his right to take cover as he exchanged the clip.

Krysta and EDI popped up and opened their own attacks. Gathering dark energy, Krysta launched a singularity orb that lifted several of the troops in the air, making them easy targets for EDI’s
incendiary attack. Their charred bodies collapsed to the ground seconds later. Silence once more consumed their location except for the normal humming of machinery. Wiping the sweat off her brow, Krysta checked her magazine and then moved forward. No sign of Kai Leng, Jones, Avery or the Illusive Man yet. Where were they all hiding? “This is too easy.”

“They can’t stop us.” Bray took to her side as he nodded his head.

“Their purpose is not to stop us, but to delay us.” EDI informed.

Krysta groaned as she glanced to the AI’s way. “I hate it when you say that.” Dashing ahead, she moved towards the ladder that would take them up to the next level. “I can’t afford to be delayed anymore!”

Bray panted as he ran up beside EDI to follow Krysta. “Cowards are wasting their men.”

“They can afford to do so. Cerberus uses reaper technology on their soldiers. Many are ordinary field agents or lab workers who were pulled away from their stations.” EDI advised. Bray stopped at the base of the ladder to look back at the robot. “You fuckin’ kiddin’, right?”

“No. I am afraid not.”

“Guys, up here! I found the labs!” Krysta yelled from the top.

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“ETA to Noveria thirty minutes. Wake up back there.” Alexandria’s voice came through the shuttle’s intercom and awoken Avery from her nap. She was curled up in her chair with her head pressed up against the cushy headrest the best that she could.

Avery yawned and slowly moved to the cabin door that led to the pilot controls. She was eager to see where she was going. The planet looked massive in the viewport and appeared nearly frozen on the outside. Was Cerberus serious about staying here and riding things out? Alexandria took notice of her presence and whirled around in her chair to slightly face her. “I wouldn’t stand too long. As soon as I hit the atmosphere, it will be a bitch coming in. Noveria has harsh winds. I’ll be lucky to steer us on course to the designated landing site. A chime popped up over her com signifying a message coming in. “Hold that thought.” She moved to answer it.

“It was what I feared. The station has been compromised by Shepard and her team. Proceed to phase two. Wait for my signal in the days to come.” The recognizable voice of the Illusive Man came over the radio frequency. It was a prerecorded call instructed to send out to all his operatives.

“What signal?” Avery pondered to herself.

Alexandria swatted at her with her hand. “Sit down! We’re approaching the atmosphere. I always hate this shit.”

Stumbling, Avery moved to her seat quickly and readjusted the harness restraint. The shuttle began to violently rock. Avery quickly closed her eyes and gripped the restraint tightly. The Illusive Man’s plan had to wait. For now, she prayed that she survived their landing. She could hear the bells of the alerts coming from the shuttle’s programs as they broke through the atmosphere minutes later to only be tossed about with the intense winds. She dared not to open her eyes to see what was going on. “Krysta…” Her voice called to her friend in the depths of her mind.

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“Krysta…hey,” Bray gently nudged her, snapping her out of her own thoughts. “Krysta, you okay?”

“Yeah, Bray.” Shepard’s focus remained on the monitor that played one of the video logs that EDI
managed to unlock while she was working on getting through the lab doors. It was a scientist
discussing Shepard’s condition during Project Lazarus. The tech advised that their undertaking
would not be successful, and that Shepard was clinically brain dead. “Just kind of hard to take it all
in right now. You know being dead and all.”

“You’re not now.” Bray shrugged. “That’s what matters and you’re with me. I can’t imagine what it
was like.”

“I can’t even describe it. Hell, I can’t even remember it. One minute was cold darkness and then I’m
staring at the ceiling of some bright lit lab. I guess…I guess I’m still me. Clinically brain dead was
not what I expected.” Her words left her as her mind raced to decrypt the limited message. What if
everything she feared earlier on was true? Was she really some high tech VI? Was she really a clone
like the thing she fought on the Citadel? Was she really a glitch and that’s the reason why she
developed feelings for Bray? “I’m still me.” She defensively spoke out to herself.

“You’re real, Shepard. Trust me.” Bray gingerly placed his fingertips on her arm.

Krysta shrugged his hand away from her and glared angrily at the console. “Bray, you only knew me
after the fact. How do you know?”

“Finally having doubts, Shepard?” A familiar voice played into her emotions from across the room.

Spinning around on her heel, she saw Jones smirking at her with a pistol at the ready. The cocky grin
flashed his white teeth at her. “You…” Krysta hissed in spite as she aimed her assault rifle back at
him. She began to gather dark energy and felt the aurora flowing around her.

Jones didn’t flinch and glanced over at Bray. “Hello, Batarian. You look much better than the last
time I saw you.”

“I’m going to rip your guts out.” Bray growled as he held his rifle barrel squarely towards the man’s
chest.

“Shepard, the door is unlocked.” EDI announced as she moved from her current task to join
Shepard’s side.

“Understood.” Krysta lowly replied as she kept her gaze on their threat. “Need to deal with this
asshole first.”

Jones motioned his head towards the console that she just viewed. “Did you like what you saw of
Project Lazarus? Pretty complex isn’t it? Miranda was good at her job.”

“You talk too much,” Krysta squeezed the trigger and fired at him. The rounds struck his biotic
barrier, not making a dent on him. The same purple aurora flashed from their impact, then
disappeared.

“Temper temper,” Jones shook his head. “We could have left you in that horrible state you were in,
Shepard. You should thank Cerberus for your life. Even though you threw it away to the aliens,” His
words dripped off his tongue like acid. “You betrayed humanity and you betrayed Avery, now it
seems you have betrayed Kaidan.” He grinned more noticing the wide-eyed expression on Krysta’s
face when he mentioned the name of her past love. “I know your profile, Shepard. Every last detail.
You did wonders against the Batarian pirates, you supported Udina to get humanity to the council
and then you died. You were resurrected and are now more sympathetic to the alien cause. Perhaps,
your entire brain damage was not corrected by Operative Lawson. I have read some studies on how
people change due to traumatic brain injuries. If the damage is severe, they become a whole different
person. Did Miranda overlook this in her analysis or try to hide it, hoping that it would not be the case? Hmm…she was always so eager to please the Illusive Man. I’m voting on the latter.”

“Shepard, don’t listen to him.” Bray shot over to her. “He’s telling you lies.”

“Am I, Batarian?” Jones chuckled as he stepped closer towards the squad. “Shepard, you and I are both combat veterans. Sure, no medics, but we have seen what shell shock can do to soldiers. That mixed with severe injuries could be quite horrendous. You need to first ditch the Batarian, Shepard. The Reapers are winning. Cerberus is only trying to save humanity.”

“I don’t know what kind of bullshit you told Avery, but your little mind games won’t work on me.” Krysta snapped back. “The Illusive Man has no wish to destroy the Reapers. He wants to control them. He has turned innocent people into husks. I saw his handiwork on Sanctuary. He’s no better than the Reapers. I’m tired of dealing with you.”

Jones used dark energy to throw a console towards the door, blocking their way. “I think you have to deal with me first.”

Krysta narrowed her eyes at his action and glanced over at her AI companion. “EDI, deal with that.” She then tapped her ear comm. “This is Shepard.”

“Go ahead, Commander.” Hackett’s voice crackled back.

Jones lifted an eyebrow as he overheard her. “What are you doing?”

“Sending you and the rest of Cerberus to hell.” Krysta smirked at him. “Hackett, I’m deep within the station and the Prothean VI will be heavily secured. Open fire on the station.”

“Commander, I can’t risk it while you and your team are still in there.” Hackett answered back. “You’re too valuable.”

“Admiral, with all due respect.” Krysta smiled inwardly, remembering how Ash told her once that she hated when people always started with that line to her. “I’m a soldier and all soldiers are expendable. We need to take Cerberus out. I’ll get the VI.”

“You’re bluffing…” Jones hissed through his teeth, not anticipating this bold move.

“Am I, Jones?” Krysta tossed back to him. “I thought you knew me.”

There was a slight pause in the comm before Hackett’s voice came back through. “Understood, Commander. All ships fire at will.” The comm went silent.

A few seconds later and multiple explosions were heard nearby, and the station jolted nearly knocking them to the ground. Jones stumbled to maintain his footing. His wide-eyed expression never left his face. Shepard also stumbled to get her footing and grabbed onto a console. She knew that time now was of the essence and if she stood there and traded words with Jones, she would lose the VI and possibly her life once more. Jones was not the type of person to just run. Bray moved and pushed her ahead towards the doorway where EDI was waiting for them. “Go!”

Krysta looked back his way as she stopped at the doorway. “Bray?”

“I’ll handle this asshole. Go on! Get the VI!” Bray turned around to confront Jones.

“Bray, damnit! I’m not leaving you behind.” Fear crept in her mind. Could he really stand up against a vanguard class biotic? IF anyone needed to stay back, it was her, but she was needed to access the
VI. That was her mission; her directive.

“I’ll get there.” Bray kept his eyes on Jones. “I want a little payback.”

Jones glared as fires began to break out at various stations from the structure damage. “Shepard! Don’t turn your back on me!” He gathered dark energy and used a singularity attack to lift a console into the air.

“Shut up.” Bray aimed at the man’s shoulders while he was distracted and pulled the trigger. The disruptor rounds burst through his shields and damaged his light armor.

Jones was knocked back slightly, and blood poured from his exposed armor. The bullets nailed the tendons and ripped them. He screamed in rage as he launched a biotic shockwave attack, slamming Bray hard into the wall. His back cracking against the solid structure before he slumped down with his rifle still in his hand.

Krysta pumped her legs as she and EDI kept running in the hallways to make their way up. She tried her best to block out the sounds of the firefight in the lab. Would this be the last time she saw Bray? She never expected a Batarian would simply lay down their life for hers or to even save humanity. Even if she did change from her formal life, maybe this change was for the better. It affected not just her, but those around her. The station jolted again, and she nearly lost her balance as she held onto the wall. “That was too close.”

Bray’s back ached and he ignored the pain as he stood back up to square off with Jones. He fired at the man again and then rolled to take cover behind a lab counter. Jones chuckled as he looked on and used his biotic ability to lift the counter with ease away from Bray. “Do you know what class biotic I am, Batarian?” He jeered. “This is merely child’s play for me.”

Bray was counting on this move and charged at the man. He flipped the rifle around to where he was holding onto the barrel tightly. The sudden maneuver caught Jones off-guard and before he had a chance to release his hold, Bray swung the rifle like a club, knocking him hard on the right side of his head. The weapon barely missed his temple, striking just below at his cheek bone, shattering the bones into fragments on the right side and knocking out a few teeth. Blood splattered out of the man’s mouth along with the fragmented teeth and his right cheek began to swell. He glared angrily at Bray and spat out the blood from his mouth and the rest of the teeth particles. “I will kill you!!” He screamed in pure rage. His words slurred by the facial deformity and blood that poured in his mouth. He reared his fist back and slammed it straight into the center of Bray’s face, fracturing his nose and making him stumble back against a counter edge. Jones took the advantage of his torso being exposed and drove a punch, fueled by dark energy, straight into his abdomen, knocking the wind out of Bray. He doubled over and wretched on the floor, gasping to regain his breaths. Jones then used the blunt side of his elbow and jabbed straight into Bray’s back, slamming him into the floor. Maneuvering, Bray grasped the man’s right ankle, holding firmly, then used his free hand to grab at his patella. He jerked hard, twisting the lower extremity in an unnatural position and slammed Jones onto the floor. Noticing the glimmer of the man’s serrated knife in his belt, Bray grabbed it from its holster. Not taking notice of this, Jones moved to climb on top of Bray, pinning his back onto the floor. His hands moved towards Bray’s neck, squeezing tightly like a vice, severing the flow of air to come up. Gasping, Bray fought back his first instinct to drop the knife and try to move the hands away from his throat. Instead, he gripped the knife’s handle and used all his energy to drive it squarely into the side of the man’s skull. The knife broke through the cranium into the brain with the tip barely noticeable on the opposite side. The man gave a sudden gasp from the quick blow and his eyes stared into nothingness. Brain matter and blood seeped out around the edges of the knife and his hold on Bray’s throat loosened as he took his final breath. His body slumped over on top of Bray’s, lifeless, with his eyes frozen in their wide-eyed expression.
Panting, Bray kicked the corpse away and stayed where he was, finding his breath. All around he could hear the fires crackling and the station being relentlessly hit by Alliance fighters outside. He moved towards a medical wall unit and took out some medigel to extinguish the pain that soared through his body and noticed that the fractured nose was not nearly as bad as the blood became clotted. Looking around, he grabbed his rifle and stumbled to move ahead in Shepard’s direction.

Krysta turned her brown eyes away from the console after watching a video log from Sanctuary. There were hundreds of them on file and EDI was able to filter to a few; one specifically was Sh’sk’s. The horrors inflicted upon the refugees on Horizon were too much. “How could anyone have such a cold heart to do this? It’s worse than torture….” She fumed under her breath.

“Shepard. I have the door unlock. The VI should be on the other side.” EDI announced from where she was.

Krysta looked back the way they came sadly. There was no sign of Bray yet. Did he fall? She had to try one time. She tapped into her comm link. “Bray. What’s your status?”

There were a few seconds of static and then the radio crackled to life with the joyful sound of his voice. “I’m hurrying my ass. I’ll be there shortly.”

Krysta smiled widely as she allowed herself to breathe once again. Her heart fluttered as she saw the bruised and battered Batarian climbing up the staircase to their position a few minutes later. The fractured nose was clearly noticeable. “You let him hit you?” She teased gently.

“Well, I put a knife to his head.” Bray countered back.

“I think you need to see this.” Krysta’s voice saddened as she led him over to the terminal.

“What is it?”

“Sh’sk’s last moments on Sanctuary.”

Bray hit play on the video log and the image of Henry Lawson appeared on the screen along with a counter at the bottom to indicate the time duration of the video recording and its current position. “Video entry Delta Alpha Zeta five. We have another Batarian test subject. Thanks to the Illusive Man. My staff implanted the reaper tech at 0600 and we are just now noticing change.” The man stepped away from the camera to allow the viewer full access to the container that held Sh’sk’s unconscious body. His body was riddled with wires going underneath his flesh at various parts and electrodes were scattered about on top of the flesh. The epidermis was becoming grossly thin revealing a transparent view of the wires. His head was already becoming deformed as well. Lawson picked up the narration in the background. “We hope to have full metamorphosis in the next twenty-four hours.” The video ceased, and the terminal became a blackened screen once more.

Bray balled his fists at his sides as hatred grew inside him. The sickening images of his friend were burnt in his mind and one that he could never be rid of, no matter how tightly he would shut his eyes. “Those sick fucks…” He seethed dangerously below his breath. “He didn’t deserve that.”

“No and that could have been you.” Krysta gently reminded him. “I can’t even fathom how I would feel if that was the case….”

Bray turned to face her. “Let’s end Cerberus right now.”

Shepard moved to the door where EDI was standing by. “Bray’s right. Let’s end this shit. I hope to find the Illusive Man cowering on the other side.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Krysta and Avery hash it out. Krysta decides to not take Bray with her to Earth. What does she plan on doing with him?

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 44

“Commander, good work out there. Your diligence is already appreciated. We finally nabbed the bastards.” Hackett’s blue holo image flickered in front of Krysta.

“Yeah, but the Illusive Man got away,” Just saying his name irked Shepard. This was not a complete success in her books. If he was free, then she would have to deal with him. At least Kai Leng and Jones were both dead.

“Let him run. Focus on the Reapers, Commander. We need to move the Crucible forward. ETA will be six hours. I’ll meet you at the rendezvous point. Hackett out.” The Admiral’s connection severed and once again a black screen was displayed. It pained her to tear away from hunting down the Illusive Man, but Hackett was right. Earth was counting on her and it was time fulfill her promise to Anderson: That she would return and bring every fleet that she could. She was going to put an end to the Reapers, an end to their so called ‘cycle.’

“Mam, incoming message from undetectable location. Shall I patch it through?” Traynor called her through the ship’s intercom.

“Already?” Krysta smirked. Judging by the type, she figured it was the Illusive Man trying to hide his pride and gloat about how he out maneuvered her. She wasn’t going to let him this time. She was going to nail him on running away. “Bring it online, Traynor. I’m ready.”

There was a few second delay and then a holo image popped up to not display the Illusive Man, but instead Avery’s face. Her hair was draped down past her shoulders and she was still wearing her Cerberus operative uniform. Fear dwelled in her eyes. The same that was portrayed on Mindoir. She appeared to almost be scared to speak, even though she was the one to initiate the call. Krysta wasn’t going to beg her for her return. Now, she was the enemy; just like any other Cerberus agent that she encountered that did not defect. “Yes?” Her icy tone set the stage for their conversation.

“Krysta, I heard that you hit where the Illusive Man was.”

“Yeah, too bad you weren’t there to see your friends killed.”

“They weren’t my friends.” Avery looked down as if she was trying to find her words. Guilt consumed her face. Was she unable to look Krysta in the eye?

“You did what you were told by Jones. You left Mindoir to Cerberus. I was right there, Avery… right fucking there.” Krysta hissed through her teeth. It took every being of her soul to not simply disconnect the line to end the fragments of her friendship then and there. “You wouldn’t listen to
reason, so why bother calling now?”

“Shepard, I was scared!” Avery blurted out. Her chest heaving as her raw emotions came pouring out. “You won’t listen to me!”

“Listen to what, Avery?” Shepard snapped back. “The same anti-alien propaganda that Cerberus is known for? The same hatred that has torn apart species? You have been to Omega. You have seen xeno-relationships. I love, Bray, Avery. I won’t stop now.”

“I know you won’t listen to me about that, Shepard. I don’t know why you have become this way, but I know you won’t change.” Avery defeatedly admitted. “I know what the Illusive Man did on Horizon was unethical, but Krysta, I think he’s on the right path.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.” Krysta threw up her hands in aggravation. “You weren’t on Sanctuary. You don’t know what horrors were inflicted upon those poor people. If your family was there—”

“My family is dead, Shepard!” Avery rebutted coldly. “I’m here now to avenge them.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing, Avery, if you would open your damn eyes!” Krysta yelled back loudly, matching the escalation of her friend’s tone.

“What if the Reapers are not the only threat waiting for us out here? What if we could use them to protect us? The Illusive Man found a way to control them, Shepard! You can’t stop him! Please don’t!”

Slamming her hands down along the rail that was in front of her, Krysta exhaustively hung her head down. “You’re already lost….” Pain came out of her mouth in a whisper. “I saw the logs. The Illusive Man has gone beyond insanity and obsession. He has implanted Reaper tech into his own body. Saren tried this and he was indoctrinated.”

“The Illusive Man isn’t Saren, Shepard. He wants to save humanity. He is strong willed. The Reapers won’t break him. He has taken every precaution—”

Krysta slowly raised her head with her bangs falling over her eyes, a soft chuckle came out of her lips. “Go ask Saren’s dead corpse about that… go ask Dr. Bryson’s dead body… hell try to find Dr. Kenson’s dead body. They all thought they would not be indoctrinated by their discoveries and they all were. They even infected ones that worked beside them.”

Avery’s eyes widened, and she seemed to take a step back from the camera. “T-that’s not me, Krysta… I-I’m not indoctrinated.”

“Are you sure?” Krysta glared hard at her friend. “You worship the Illusive Man just like Benezia did with Saren.” She was losing precious time as the clock was ticking down to meet up with Hackett. “Avery, I don’t know where you are right now, but when this is over, and you’re still with Cerberus, I will kill you.” She reached out and made herself terminate the call. Tears formed in her eyes as she looked at the blackened room once again. Dragging herself away, she moved towards her quarters. She had to use what time she had left with Bray.

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Avery couldn’t hold in her emotions once the line was abruptly cut-off and Shepard’s final words echoed in her mind. Tears stream down her face and she held her herself as she broke down.

Alexandria looked on in the doorway. “You have your answer, Avery.”
Wiping her hot tears from her eyes and cheeks, Avery shook her head. “No, I-I needed it. Krysta is the one lost.” A half-way lie. Deep down, she was silently mulling over their exchange of words. Did she make the right choice? Krysta wasn’t going to plea for her nor help her. It was up to her to decide. For now, she would shelve it to a later time. She needed to know more of where she was and what purpose they had on this frigid planet. “What’s my purpose here?”

Alexandria gave a light-hearted shrug. “Beats me. The main crew is asleep, so I guess we’ll both find out in a few hours. All I was told was to fly us here and await our orders. Guess we may be studying large dead bugs.” She moved away from the room’s door, Avery followed. “I don’t know how exciting this research will be, but I guess it’s better than being dead on Cronos, huh, Avery?” The woman’s smile disappeared when she looked back to see Avery was not really enjoying the conversation. In fact, Avery was slowly falling behind, and her eyes were directly on the floor. “Lighten up. You really think Shepard will find us here? I have faith in Cerberus and once the Illusive Man establishes his hold on the Reapers, then she will wish that she listened to us.”

Everything okay?” Bray greeted Shepard at her quarters with a look of worry on his four-eyed face. “That call took longer.”

“Avery called me too.” Krysta walked past him and moved to remove her uniform down to her tank.

The name caught Bray’s attention. “What did she want?” He hissed through his razor-sharp incisors, remembering the pain that was inflicted upon him due to her betrayal.

“To still convince me that I’m wrong about everything.” Krysta rolled her eyes and then cupped her face with her hands as she sat on the bed’s edge. “I can’t deal with it right now. I need to focus. In six hours, we move forward with the Crucible and reclaim Earth. It’s going to be what I’ve never faced before.”

Bray quickly moved to her side and drew her head to his shoulder. “Then you need your rest, Shepard.”

She playfully pushed him away. “How can I rest? When you’re sitting this close to me looking all sexy like that?”

The comment made his cheeks grow warm and then he smiled. “I’ve never been with anyone like you, Shepard. To think that you wanted to shoot me when we first met.”

“What makes you think I have changed my mind?” Krysta gave him a playful smile as she scooted back into the bed.

Bray felt arousal stirring inside him as his eyes followed her barely clothed body. “You-you think that we- “

“Relax, Bray. I just want you to hold me.” She warmly patted the spot next to her. He moved over next to her, not bothering to remove his clothing and placed his arms around her body, drawing her near him. His warm breath gently touching her bare skin. She nuzzled into his arms and felt peace wash over her like a flood. How she longed for this moment. What time they had left was not enough. She closed her eyes as she told herself that she would simply rest her eyes, but fatigue overcame her, and she slipped into unconsciousness.
“Shepard Commander.” Legion’s familiar metallic voice spoke out to her as she opened her eyes. She was no longer in the bed with Bray, but in the same haunting backdrop that plagued her dreams since the Reapers attacked Earth.

“Shepard Commander.” Legion’s familiar metallic voice spoke out to her as she opened her eyes. She was no longer in the bed with Bray, but in the same haunting backdrop that plagued her dreams since the Reapers attacked Earth.

“Legion? I thought you were offline.” She spoke out to the vacant space as she looked around. Deep down, she knew he was terminated after he was able to override the corrupt Geth and ensure his kind’s utopia with the Quarians once and for all. She moved forward to find her old teammate, but it felt like she was getting nowhere.

“Shepard.” A booming voice spoke so clearly that it seemed like its owner was right beside her. “You will not stop us.”

“Harbinger…” Krysta seethed as anger overpowered her. “You better hide because I’m coming for you.”

“You will fail. You delay the inevitable. You will submit to your ascension. You will arrive to your perfection.”

“My perfection?” Shepard laughed at the voice. “You call the Reaper husks a perfection?! You don’t give organics the choice! Your idea of ascension is hell!”

“You will ascend. You all will.” Harbinger’s voice seemed to fade away, leaving her standing there in an unknown meek location.

Forcing herself to wake up, Krysta stared up at the star view ceiling above her bed, taking several long slow deep breaths to relax herself. Another nightmare. She never really studied the purpose of dreams, but she wondered where Harbinger came from. A part of her wanted to believe that somehow, he could manage to infiltrate her subconscious mind, but to do that, she had to be indoctrinated and she was not that. It had to be her brain processing all the data it had obtained throughout the many months and compiled it. Bray was sleeping soundly beside her and she smiled as she watched him for several moments. She almost lost him on Cronos and on Omega. He could fight, but she feared for his safety. She couldn’t be selfish and keep him by her side down in the trenches. Hell, she really didn’t want her team there, but they were fully committed. They would be down there even if she told them no. Especially, Vega. He wanted to remain on Earth despite their first departure. She lost Kaidan when he accompanied her on Virmire and she didn’t want to go through the same pain again. Knowing that Bray would fully protest her decision, she had to go through what her next step would be. She had to keep him safe and away from the Reapers for now. Even if she managed to not survive, she wanted him to live. If he remained with her, he would surely die by her side if it came down to it and she had no idea what to expect when she reached Earth. The war with the Reapers was warfare like no one ever seen. It was very unconventional, and the standard Alliance playbook was thrown aside.

Slipping back on her clothes, she checked her omni to see she had about two more hours before their meeting point. She could make the call if she was able. Tiptoeing out of her quarters, she moved towards the elevator and found Traynor at her post on the CIC level. The surprised woman turned around to salute Krysta. “Officer on deck!” She announced to those working around her. The others rose up quickly to salute with her.

Krysta returned the salute and then glanced around at everyone who was dutifully manning their stations. “Surprised to see you awake.”

“Too excited to sleep, mam.” Traynor blushed a little. “My heart has been pounding ever since we left that station. Did you need something? I don’t see any messages yet.”
“Any way I can get a video call to Omega?” Krysta tossed out.

Traynor moved to her terminal and then nodded. “Yes. Comm buoy is close enough to hold a signal for another twenty minutes. Shall I go ahead and place the call for you, Commander?”

“Yes. Aria T’ Loak. Tell her it’s urgent.”

The request threw Traynor off and she fumbled at her keyboard. “Um, right. I’ll make the call now.”

Making a beeline back to the communication center of the ship, Krysta debated if she should requisition a cot to stay back there. She spent more time communicating with people than she did in her own bed. Aria’s face came up two minutes later. “Shepard, have you won the war?”

“Don’t start, Aria.” Krysta snapped back. “We are heading to Sol now to end this.”

“Good for you. Here to give me a status report? Has Bray reached your squadmate of the month?” She leered.

“That’s what I’m calling you about. I want to send Bray back there. Can you send a ship to intersect for transport? I need it here ASAP.”

“What?” Her eye ridge rose up as if the update almost offended her. “Not working out for you? Pity.”

“Can you send one or not?” Krysta cut her off.

Aria frowned for once. “Were my ships not enough, Shepard? I gave you most of my fleet that I acquired, mercs and eezo. You even stole Bray from me.”

“You and I both know that he didn’t leave Omega on his own admission.”

“You have grown soft, Shepard. I thought you were stronger than that when you were here helping me. Or was all that talk a facade?” T’Loak didn’t allow her the opportunity to defend herself. Shepard squared her jaw and refused to answer anymore banter. Frustrated, she moved her right hand over to the control to terminate the call. Her fingers hovered over the button. Aria took notice of this and waved her fingers to dismiss the overplayed emotions that Shepard was hiding from her.

“Fine. A ship is on your way. Satisfied?”

“Thank you, Aria.”

“Make sure they come back. I can’t risk anymore for your war. I have a station to run, Shepard.”

Krysta grimaced by the shot. “I wouldn’t dare ask that of you,” Sarcasm rolled off her tongue and she ended the call. “Bitch,” She huffed. She didn’t like to ask Aria of anything, but this had to be done. There were no other options and Omega was far from the war right now. Bray would be safe. Realizing the steps that were about to follow, Shepard let her fingers linger on the rail before slipping away towards the door once more. It was time to prep.

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“Fifth Fleet inbound. Admiral Hackett is requesting to board.” Joker’s announcement came over the PA. The admiral was known to be punctual and arrived with only five minutes to spare from the time frame he gave.

Shepard paused outside the shuttle and set down the crate of ammo she was hauling. “Permission granted, Joker. I’ll be up there shortly.”
“Finally, ready to get back at those fuckers.” James pounded the palm of his left fist with his right. Javik for once didn’t open his mouth for a smart aleck response. Instead, he remained composed as if he was contemplating their current situation. James and Krysta both picked up on this for being an out of character trait. “You okay, Prothy?”

Javik scowled. “I do not wish to be called that.”

Vega shrugged in a non-caring state. “Be that way. Glad you’re here.”

“Yeah, Javik. Thank you for sticking with us.” Krysta smiled softly at the ancient alien.

Their touching moment did not faze him. The scowl remained on his face. “You really think one Prothean will stop them, Commander? My entire species could not. Your species were primitive then and you are primitive now. Vengeance will be my goal. I will atone for all those that lost during the wars.”

Krysta sighed at her teammate. “I guess that’s good enough as a pep talk as I will get from you.” She motioned for James to continue their task while she moved towards the elevator to prepare for Hackett’s arrival on the Normandy.

“Hey, Shep?” James called to her.

“Yeah, James?”

“I know you could have chosen someone else for this mission. I am…I’m honored.” He saluted. Javik groaned and rolled his eyes.

Krysta smiled and saluted back. “At ease, soldier. You wanted to be part of the N7 program. Well consider this your induction.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t tag the Batarian to come with you.” Vega added. Krysta cringed, realizing another issue that she would need to address shortly. No word yet from Aria’s ship, but they should be arriving in no time.

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Bray stood at the pilot’s doorway, propped up against it with his arms crossed, listening to Hackett address the crew. Shepard stood behind the well-dressed man in her blue formal attire with her badges proudly displayed. In that getup to him, she seemed like a totally different person. Not the same person he encountered on Omega; not the renegade woman that he fell for. She seemed almost restricted by her appearance. Figuring he would be on the ground team called Hammer with Shepard, Bray already had his rifle attached to his back and his body yearned for a cigarette. It had been months since he had a smoke and the hook never left his body completely. The anticipation was rattling his nerves and he was itching for some action. He glanced back at Joker who stood hunched over dutifully to listen to the admiral’s speech. “You got any smokes?”

Joker glared hard at him in annoyance. “Shhh! Really?”

The reaction irked Bray and he grumbled under his breath as he retook his position. The rest of Shepard’s crew, the non-Alliance members, stood silently, listening in closely. What made them so perfect? Did he really fit into this? After Hackett finished, he stepped down and shook hands with Krysta before they both disappeared in the comm room. A chime came on Joker’s panel and the brash young pilot limped back to his chair and took the helm with EDI sitting by his side in her co-pilot’s chair. “It’s registered from Aria T’Loak on Omega. She’s not registered to be part of his fleet, Jeff.”
Bray noticed the pilot wincing as if the AI uncovered a secret that he wasn’t supposed to know. “Gee, thanks, EDI. Ever heard of being discreet?” Jeff mouthed angrily.

“Why?” The question didn’t resonate with the AI. “What are we being discreet about?”

“He means me.” Bray growled lowly. “What the hell does Aria want? Answer her, damnit.”

“This isn’t a good time for you-” Joker started to speak up, but Bray nudged his chair hard. “Ow! Watch it! Brittle!” He moved to answer the call. “Normandy here.”
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Bray heads back to Omega while Shepard goes on to reclaim Earth with Hackett. Avery finds out that Cerberus has taken over Peak 15.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 45

“This ship stinks. Too fresh,” The large dark yellow toned Krogan sniffed as he entered the Normandy first from Aria’s ship. He had a deep facial scar on the left side of his face and a clan Weyrloc tattoo on his face that covered a good portion of his right. Bray recognized him to be Kirkan; One of the many Krogan on Aria’s payroll. He worked early shift at door duty and often passed Bray when he was leaving to head home. Despite not being with his clan, Kirkan proudly supported them and always made sure that any one that he encountered knew that he was part of the strong clan Weyrloc. He ignored the rumors that clan Urdnot took them over on Tuchanka. Bray didn’t bother on arguing with him. He didn’t care about Krogan political affairs, much like he didn’t care about any political stories that arose from the Citadel or Khar’ Shaan. His thunderous footsteps stopped after entering the vessel when he saw two-armed Alliance soldiers in front of him. He eyed them carefully. “I suggest you get out of the way, squishy humans. I’m not here for you.” His reptilian eyes spotted Bray standing over where Joker was. “Bray…I would be a Salarian’s uncle…you are here!” He chuckled as he looked back at his accomplice. “Moklan, you were right.”

Bray didn’t smile when he heard the name of his former coworker. The goateed Batarian moved around Kirkan to get a good look of him. “Bray, you’re not dead.”

“Too bad I disappointed you, Moklan.” Bray snarled.

Krysta exited the comm room with Hackett and took notice of their new guests. Panicking, she politely excused herself and swiftly moved towards Bray, leaving Hackett standing there in confusion. Moklan took notice of Krysta’s approach. “Aria sent us here for the pickup.”

“Awkward…” Joker cringed over to EDI. Krysta glared at him sharply and then redirected her attention back to the situation at hand.

“Bray,” She began slowly, trying to find her words. This scenario is not what she plotted out. She didn’t expect them to arrive while she was away with the Hackett on their call with Anderson and not to meet up with Bray first. She wanted to let him down easy first. “They are here by my invitation.”

“What are they picking up?” Bray turned to face her with an accusatory glance.

“He doesn’t know?” Moklan joined in with a laugh. “Nice.”

“We cartin’ your ass back to Aria.” Kirkan added.

Hurt. Bray found it difficult to meet Krysta’s gaze and his jaw tightened as he felt all the eyes of the
Normandy now transfixed upon him. He never saw this coming. “I am not going.” His words tore at his mouth as they came out.

“I didn’t fly all the way here for nothin’,” Kirkan grunted.

“I got this.” Shepard snapped at the burly Krogan. She rubbed the part of her nose between her eyes and then looked back over at Bray. “Bray, let’s go somewhere private to discuss this.”

“No,” The Batarian seethed. “You made your decision.” He shoved his way between Moklan and Kirkan the best that he could to head towards the tube where the ship was waiting for him on the other side.

“Easy enough.” Moklan tossed the Krogan a shrug and turned to follow Bray into the ship.

Krysta didn’t want things to end this way. “Damnit. Bray!” She called after him.

The Batarian paused in his stride and allowed the others to walk past him. His body standing in the interlocking tube. “Yeah?”

“You’re just leaving just like that?” Shepard felt her heart racing. She knew she had to let him go to ensure his survival, but now she was up to that moment and she couldn’t do it. The pressure of everyone watching made things even more difficult. Spinning around, she confronted the onlookers. “Dismissed, everyone. Return to your duties.” She tossed her almond colored eyes back at Hackett before she followed Bray to where he stood.

“You could have told me,” Bray picked up their argument.

“You wouldn’t have agreed!” Krysta’s voice rose.

“Was it that bad to be with me?”

“What?” His question threw her for a loop.

“You know what…the sex.” He spat sourly.

Joker, who was the only one to hear their conversation still, picked up on this and snickered over to EDI. “I need popcorn.”

Overhearing the pilot, Krysta growled angrily and turned to address him. “Joker!”

Caught, Joker spun around in his seat to return his duties as well. “I’m on it, mam!”

“Bray, it wasn’t that.” Shepard returned to the conversation, although, lowered her voice to keep from prying ears this time. Maybe where Bray came from, he could be blunt without really caring, but there were some issues that remained private to her among her crew. “You don’t know what you will be facing on Earth.”

“Gaping at her, hearing her words, Bray shook his head in disbelief and swiftly moved in. He caught the back of her head with his right hand and pulled her closer. Finding her lips, he kissed her passionately. She returned the kiss just as passionately and wrapped her arms around his armor,
gripping the solid form tightly. After several seconds, Krysta moved away from his lips and looked at
him. “Go with them. Get to Omega and stay safe.”

“No.” Bray shook his head. “You’re not going to die there alone.”

“Damnit, Bray. Don’t make me biotically shove you onto that ship.” She gripped his hand tightly as
she fought back the tears in her eyes. She had to stay strong.

This aroused a chuckle from him. “You may have to.” Seeing how serious she was, he held her hand
with his and covered it with his other. “Shepard, you better bring that hot ass back to me.”

Krysta felt her face flush as she giggled. “Oh, I will. I will need some pampering when this over
with.”

“I will.”

Hackett came up behind Krysta and gently tapped her right shoulder, clearing his throat.

“Commander, we need to move.”

Krysta looked back to acknowledge him with a nod and then looked back at Bray, trying not to
choke up. “Goodbye, Bray.”

“I’ll see you soon.” Bray gave her one more look before entering the bowels of the ship,
disappearing from her view.

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Settling down in the chair next to Moklan in front of the controls, Bray slumped in his seat as he
fought the urge to check the screens to watch them slowly move away from the Normandy. He never
felt the emotions before that resonated within him. He couldn’t even express how he felt and he
certainly wasn’t going to try in front of his present company. “Anything good happening on
Omega?” He casually tossed out, trying his best to perk himself up.

Moklan chuckled as he set their flight path to the relay. “Some new dancers. I think one has eyes for
me.”

“You say that for all the dancers.” Bray pointed out.

“Not this time. When I get back, I’m going to get me some Asari ass.”

Bray shifted upwards in his seat to sit straighter as he felt the engines pulsing to life and then a thrust
as they made their way to the relay. He closed his eyes as he tried to push out any thought of
Shepard from his mind. Was it going to be the last time he would ever see her? Maybe he was
destined to remain with Aria. After all, change seemed to be inescapable on Omega.

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An older gentleman wearing a lab coat was the first to greet Alexandria and Avery at the checkpoint.
“Greetings. I’m Doctor Mlkar. I appreciate the help. Things have really picked up since our finding
in the hot labs.” His accent appeared to be thick Slavic and Avery struggled to pick up on all the
words, but she was able to understand most of what he was saying to comprehend.

“Oh?” Alexandria followed him first as he guided them deeper inside the labs.

“Yes, we picked up Peak 15 a year after Shepard left. The place was a mess since the neutron purge.
We figured that we would just be salvaging data and analyzing dead Rachni corpses.”

“How did the Executive Board allow access to this place?” Alexandria further questioned with
interest. Avery remained silent as she listened in on their conversation. She didn’t know anything about Noveria or this Peak 15. She had no idea what the Executive Board meant.

The man turned around with a smile, flashing his ocean deep blue eyes. His teeth were perfectly straight and there was little white stubble on his face. His gray hair was slicked back and cut at the shoulders. “We used the front as a group from Sirta. We paid their fee plus a little more. We advised that we were using the data for our current genome project. The creds spoke more than what we said. They granted us access and didn’t check in after that.”

“Did you guys find anything?” Avery finally broke her silence. The labs had dim lighting and the white walls made everything feel so sterile. Several technicians were bustling around with their noses stuck in their datapads, not bothering to lift to greet the newcomers. Avery felt out of place here and she didn’t know really what her purpose was or Alexandria’s for that matter. Alexandria seemed more of a pilot with a few combat skills at best.

“You can say that.” Mlkar stopped at the next door that was locked by an access code panel. He took a moment to punch in his code, making sure his back clearly blocked their view and then continued walking once the door opened. “This is why I said I’m glad we have help. Several weeks after arriving on Peak 15, we made quite the discovery. The previous…occupants…studied a Rachni queen after her hatching and try to use her to control the drones she birthed. Ultimately, they could not keep their hold and the Rachni drones broke free from their cells, infesting the facility, killing majority of the staff. Shepard came to Noveria with her squad and it appears per the computer, Mira, that she killed the Rachni Queen and used a neutron purge to wipe out the drones.”

“So, what did you guys discover then?” Alexandria cut to the chase. Avery could tell that the woman hated to listen to long-winded explanations.

The doctor didn’t answer them. Instead, he moved towards to the right side of the large room that they were in and stepped aside to let their sight answer for him. Once he was not obstructing their view, Alexandria and Avery saw a Rachni Queen chained up inside a large glass tube. The large bug noticed their presence, reared her head at them and gave the most horrific hiss that Avery ever heard. The young woman became startled and jumped back as if she expected the Rachni to break her cell to come at her. Alexandria didn’t flinch and stared at the creature with a wide-eye expression. “You found another one?”

“An egg at first from the previous queen. Missed by the Commander and pushed aside by Binary Helix. It had been dormant for so long that we were wondering if she was dead, but all her vitals showed up in the scans. The find was very…exciting if you could imagine it.” Mlkar’s voice peaked joyfully. “We had to request more staffing for research, building and of course, security. We tacked onto studies that we intercepted by Dr. Bryson when he also studied the effects of the queen’s hold on her drones. The Illusive Man was very interested in our theories, so he acclimated the funds necessary. Of course, we caught the attention of the Executive Board, so we had to deal with that another way…” He closed the visor down to block their view from the Queen and directed them to follow him once more towards another part of the complex.

“You guys are doing the same research as Binary Helix?” Avery asked in alarm. She had no real intel about what happened out here other than what he told her. It sounded horrendous, especially for those caught up in it. She didn’t like the idea that the same dangerous insects were being bred once again. She wanted to get away, far away.

“Essentially yes, but we have learned from their mistakes and we are going to take this to the next step.”

“How did you deal with the Executive Board this time?” Alexandria added on.
“We had to have a very unpleasant conversation with them. Particularly, Administrator Anoleius.”
Mlkar led the two women towards the prisoner cells and revealed the light purple skin Salarian sitting in the cell with his legs up to his chest. His body sickening small due to malnutrition. Avery gasped at his very site and turned away quickly.

Anoleius overheard her gasp and lifted his head to look at them through the bullet proof large window pane. “Who are you? I want out! This is maddening!”

“He was just one. The others are in their own perspective cells. We even collected a few extra to be potential test subjects when we are ready.”

“How did you get away with this?” Alexandria asked not with concern for the prisoners’ wellbeing, but instead for her own safety. “Wouldn’t this reach wind of the Council?”

“We locked down Port Hanshan with increased security patrols and due to the current war, no one can spare the men to assist them.” He assured her.

“What is this for?” Avery butted in.

“This goes with the Reaper indoctrination and control. We have implanted the Queen and her drones with Reaper tech. We heard that the Reapers tried to create a Rachni Queen. An abomination. We have the situation stable.”

“But isn’t the Illusive Man taking care of controlling them?”

“My dear. We are producing him research data every hour and even once we control the Reapers, this will help us even more make mankind the dominant race of the galaxy. The lesser species will fall.” He revealed another cell that housed a deep brown turian with white face paint in a business suit.

The Turian rose to his feet and narrowed his eye ridges at them. “Are you humans here to mock me?”

“Lorik Qui’in. A manager of Synthetic Insights on Noveria. Very smug.” Mlkar explained as he turned back to face Alexandria and Avery. “I have him listed to be one of first test subjects once the drones are ready.”

Avery frowned at the Turian. Seeing him almost reminded her of a Turian that was part of the Talons when she was on Omega. He fell during Cerberus’ raid on the station. Luckily to them and not an adjutant. Hearing Mlkar talk made her think about how the adjutants flooded the station. Cerberus lost their hold of the creatures they made with Reaper tech. Now it seemed like old habits die hard and they were at it again with Rachni. She didn’t know much about the insect like creatures, but it appeared any research on them was dangerous and fatal. “What are our orders?” She asked him, wondering if he had plans to use her as well like the citizens of Port Hanshan. Deep down, she knew she had to find a way to get off the planet or at least away from Peak 15.

“Guard duty for now. You can remain here, Avery, for the rest of the shift. Alexandria, come with me. I’ll find you a station.” The man motioned for the older woman to follow him away.

Alexandria turned and smiled back at Avery. “This is it, kid. Nice seeing you. I’m sure we will grab some lunch at the mess one day. There are a couple of rovers outside. We can sneak out for night ride if you want.”

“Yeah,” Avery meekly smiled, trying her best to force herself to appear calm.
“Human.” Lorik called to her several minutes after they left. The white faced Turian was still standing looking directly at her. “

“Um, yes?”

“I see that you’re new here. When am I fed?”

“I-I don’t know.” Avery stumbled. He was very abrasive to her. She couldn’t blame him. She was standing there, a free person, in a Cerberus uniform, the same group of his captors.

“See to it.”

“You have to be kidding.”

“Yes, all of this is an elaborate joke. I’m the blunt of it.” He grimly reminded her.

“I should have never left Shepard….” Avery confessed out loud.

Lorik picked up on this. “Shepard? You mean the Human Spectre? The so called ‘savior’ of the galaxy?”

Avery spun around to look at him once more. “You know her?” She wanted to talk about her old friend, to ease her mind. Her friend was diving deep into Hell to go up against odds that no one should ever face.

“She came here once. Conned me in giving her a garage pass by stealing my property.” He sourly replied.

“Oh….” Avery’s face faltered. This wasn’t going to be a pleasant conversation to reminiscence about her good friend.

“What is she up to now?”

Avery shrugged as she sat down on the floor across from his cell. “I don’t know. Fighting Reapers, I guess on Earth. Hoping to end this war. Either her or the Illusive Man.”

“I like to wager and if I could, I would bet on her versus this man of yours.” Qui’in stood in his cell, now looking down upon her. “You don’t have much resentment of my kind like some of your counterparts. I think you humans would say ‘Fresh off the street’?”

“No. Well…maybe.” Avery shrugged. “I was from Earth, then the Citadel, then Omega.

“You get around.”

“I can’t believe I’m sitting here like this.”

“We are having a pleasant conversation. It gets very boring here. Does it offend you to talk with a Turian?”

“Well, no. I used to work with plenty when I was with Talons.”

“Talons? The group of ruffians on Omega?” He chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Cerberus must be getting very desperate for volunteers.”
Avery’s eyes fell to the floor as guilt overwhelm her. “Maybe they are…”
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Shepard says her goodbyes to Bray after a loss on London. Avery makes a fatal decision.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 46

A few pats on the back welcomed Bray back to Afterlife that evening when he reported to Aria. Mostly were from old coworkers or drunk regular patrons that recognized him. “Hey, you’re back!” One Turian shouted out to him over the fast bass music.

“What took you so long?” Another Batarian called out to him from the other side.

“Hey, sexy. I want to hear all about your adventure when I’m off duty.” An Asari waitress cooed up along beside him before scuttling away with her tray.

Space travel became complex when it came to calculating out orbit cycles and the standard Council Space time. To Bray, it felt merely hours since leaving the Normandy, but in hindsight, it had been almost a day and half cycle on Omega since his return. He wondered if Shepard was still battling it out on the streets of Earth. Or did she win? Or, worse off, was she severely injured or dead? There was no communication yet and he was hoping to have something. Nobody on Omega cared about the Reaper war so there was no real news about what was going on. The only thing he heard since his arrival was that the Blood Pack was picking up recruits and territory and the Eclipse was losing since majority of their men went off by Aria’s decision to help Shepard. The Blood Pack saw the opportunity and made the power move. Would Aria make them give it all up once the Eclipse mercs returned? Things could get ugly soon on the station if Aria didn’t maintain her control. That’s all they needed; another gang war.

Surprisingly, Aria was standing at the entrance of her platform with a smile on her purple skinned face. She picked up on some of the cheers from his fans in the club. “You made quite the impression I see.”

Bray responded with a grunt and moved past her to take his position, however, froze when he saw that Moklan had already beaten him there. “Get out of my way.” Moklan didn’t budge.

“Moklan, you are dismissed. Head back to your original post.”

Glaring hard at his friend, the Batarian obliged with the order and bumped up hard against Bray’s right arm before heading down the steps. Once he was gone, Bray moved back to reclaim his spot at Aria’s side. Aria took her place on her red couch and looked up at him. “You really think you should keep that?”

“What?”

“I’m letting you have your old job back. I almost decided to put you down in the docks or the
mines.” Her words lingered in the air as a firm reminder of who he was dealing with. She was not bluffing. With a snap of her fingers, she could have that done. Bray remained quiet and let his eyes move out towards the dance floor.

An Asari handmaiden moved up the steps a few minutes later. “Aria, there’s a call coming in…” She darted her cerulean blue eyes over to Bray. “It’s for Bray…high priority…origin is Earth.”

Bray felt his heart stop when he overheard the message. He broke his guard and looked down at Aria to see what she would say or do. When she didn’t reply, he pressed the issue. “Aria, I need-“

“Route the call to my private room. Bray, I’ll go with you.” Aria rose up from the couch. By seeing the twisted expression on his face, she knew that her presence to this private matter was unwanted. He had no say in this. “You betrayed me before. I want to make sure you are not scheming.”

Defeated, Bray followed her to her private room and waited for the door to close behind them. Aria moved over to the holo communication screen and stepped to the side to allow him to man the controls. “I’ll be listening in.” She flatly prompted him.

Bray hesitated, his finger hovering over the button to connect the call. He wondered if this would be not the type of news he was looking for. Forcing his finger down, he pressed the button and a few seconds later, the holo image of Krysta Shepard appeared on the screen. It was hard to see if she had any injuries to her with the blue tone pixilation. “Bray, glad to see you made it back.”

“Yeah,” He chuckled light heartedly. “Not as quiet as your ship. How is it down there?”

Krysta sighed hard through the image and shook her head. “Not good. There are so many dead bodies, Bray. I’ve never seen such devastation. The sad thing is that it’s my home. I don’t even recognize it.”

“Where are you at now?”

“A Forward Operations Base in London. It’s been two days since we hit Earth and I don’t think I have slept much since I reached this place. The rest of team Hammer finally made it…well what was left of it. I would say…half.”

“Half?”

“The Reapers had every contingency out there. Many of the shuttles carrying the troops to the points were shot down. I lost Cortez after the drop off… another tick for them.” She sighed heavily once again. “James is taking his loss hard. Javik took a nasty hit to his right leg from a Banshee. God, there are so many of those damned things down here.”

“I should have been there with you.” Bray argued.

“No. I want you there on Omega, Bray. Maybe, that will give me some damn hope to see to the end of this war.”

“What are you doing next?”

“Meeting up with Anderson. Hitting No Man’s Land next, then pressing forward to the beam. Not sure what I will find there. Anderson said that it connects to the Citadel and that’s where we will implement the Catalyst. Another two more days of fighting at least.”

“Hurry up and get your ass back here, Shepard.” Bray felt hopeless standing there, talking to her. She seemed so exhausted and deep down, he could tell she was petrified of what she was enduring
and what she was about to see. He wasn’t too sure how well he would hold up if he was in London living through that.

“Heh. I'm counting on it.” Krysta cracked a forced smile at him. “Drink a drink for me while I’m gone.”

“I'll buy you plenty when you get here.”

Air raids could be heard in the background and this distraction pulled Krysta’s face away from the holo screen momentarily. She then looked back at him with the same strong neutral face he remembered when he first met her. “Bray, this is it. I love you.”

“I- “Bray casted a glance over at Aria, almost forgetting that his employer was standing right there, listening to every second of their conversation. Aria was propped up against the back wall with her arms crossed. He returned his look back at Krysta. “I love you too, Krysta. See you soon. Bray out.” He disconnected the line and looked down at his finger that was still on the button.

Aria moved towards him. “That was sickening.” She spat. Bray remained quiet as he still stared down at his finger, mulling over his words with Shepard. “If you are satisfied, I have a station to run.”

Bray moved away and followed her out. “Aria, she needed more men than what you gave her.”

“She has plenty and will do fine.” Aria whirled around on her high heel and pointed her finger into his chest sharply. “Don’t start to act like her. It’s so…annoying.”

“Fine.”

“The Reapers are there. Away from here. That’s your only concern.” Aria hurried her steps to retake her claim on her platform, leaving him there in his thoughts.

Krysta took a deep breath as she walked through the ruined structure that was the FOB and side stepped around the medics that were tending to the soldiers’ wounds. Up ahead, she saw Urdnot Wrex at a gaping hole transfixed at the backside of the building that overlooked the ground below. As she neareded, she noticed that a good bulk of the Krogan army were down on the ground from where he stood, lined up in a military fashion. Wrex’s red eyes glanced her way and he turned around to greet her with a smile. “Shepard!” He extended his large yellow reptilian hand.

Accepting it warmly, Krysta shook it and felt so small, compared to the towering Krogan. “Wrex.”

“My men are ready.” Wrex pointed down below. “That’s part of my team. The others are over on the other side. Anderson wanted them there too. Needed to bulk of the defenses…heh. The Krogan are always needed.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” Krysta glanced down to see the many Krogan staring up at her.

“Only this time, we don’t have any backstabbing species neutering us after this. The Krogan population will pick up and we will be expanding to glory once again.”

“You still going to give Garrus a tough time about what his species did to you?” Krysta giggle.

“Of course.” Wrex grinned. “He’s a Turian and well…he deserves it.”

“How’s Eve?”
“Finally, leaving me alone. In a few more months, she will be having the first little whelps. If we have a girl, I’ll name one Shepard,” He chuckled.

“I would be honored, Wrex.”

“We had good times, Shepard. Remember all the fun chats we had on the Normandy?”

“And in the elevators on the Citadel,” Krysta tossed back playfully, rolling her eyes. “Who you taking out there?”

“Garrus and Liara,” Shepard grinned back at him. Wrex’s face faltered. “Liara?”

“Well, I would have taken you, but you’re a leader yourself now.” Krysta teased.

“Just keep Garrus in line.” Wrex chuckled. “Shepard.”

“Wrex.”

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Alexandria met up with Avery at dinner in the mess hall and tossed her the rover key across the table. “Didn’t think you were serious, girl.”

“I always wanted to drive one.” Avery used her right-hand fingers to quickly draw the key card across the table and slipped it into her pocket. “How did you manage to get one?”

Alexandria took a bite of her salad and smiled a little with her lips shut. Swallowing her food, she finally said, “I get around.”

Avery happily bit into her sandwich as she thought back to her plan. She hated to use the woman, but she was the only way to getting out of there. Avery didn’t trust her, but she trusted her more than the others. “How’s your post?”

“Girl, I’m dealing with bug duty. I have to stand there and keep an eye on the drones that are all locked up. I mean if they are locked up, what is my purpose?” She groaned. “Can’t wait for a reassignment. I already put in a request. As soon as the Illusive Man is done with his mission, then off I go.” She twirled her fork around on her plate, pushing some of the lettuce pieces to the side. “Maybe I can get them to take you with me.”

“Any word from the Illusive Man?”

“Not a word since we left. Supposedly, Shepard is on Earth now too. No word yet on that either. I really hope she is killed.” Avery tried to hide the fact that what Alexandria just said bother her. She quickly shoved in another bite of her sandwich. “So, I think the guards switch patrols around 0200 hours, we can have a twenty-minute window to sneak out.”

That meant to Avery she had about ten minutes to pull off what she was really planning. She just hoped that the woman wasn’t too functional on her timing. “I can meet you at the end of my shift tonight. It ends right before the exchange.” She paused and looked at her friend timidly. “What if we get caught coming back?”

Alexandria shrugged it off nonchalantly. “For joyriding? What do they expect? No one is going anywhere around here.” She pushed her plate to the side and stood up. “Break is over. I’ll see you then, right?”
“Yeah.” Avery gloomily replied. This was now or never. Once she implemented the plan, she couldn’t go back. She had to get off Peak 15 and once she was off, she had to find a way to make it to the docks before she was detected. This Lorik Qui’in that she encountered may be her only hope.

Heading back to her station, she saw the same Turian looking her way. This time, instead of standing, he was sitting down, his eyes directly upon her. Taking a gulp and looking around, Avery noticed the security cam had done the five-minute rotation away from her position and quickly moved to Lorik’s cell. “Don’t talk, just listen.” She looked back at the camera to make sure it was still in place and then slowly pulled out the key card to where the end was the only part showing. “I have a rover. If I take you along, can you get me off this planet?” The Turian studied her for a moment before slowly nodding his head. His eyes studied her as if he was debating if this was a setup. “Good, we leave precisely at 0200,” She whispered and stuffed the card back in her pocket. Her heart was racing. She was at the point of no return already.

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Avery hung around beyond her shift until it was time to execute her plan. Her omni chirped to remind her of the time. She watched the camera move away for the five-minute window. Running over to Lorik’s cell, she opened the door and looked at the Turian in silence. “Go on, human,” He ushered her along.

Taking a gulp, she withdrew her pistol and kept it close to her chest as she escorted him down the hallway towards one of the facility doors. They were now during the period of the guard exchange, so no one would be manning the video footage. Slipping through the door that led to the garage that housed the rovers, Avery felt her steps becoming quicker and could hear Lorik running behind her. Coming to the rovers, she glanced over the numbers until she saw the one that matched the one that was on the key card. “It’s this one!” She motioned to him.

“Avery?” A familiar voice called to her.

Frozen, recognizing the voice to be coming from Alexandria, the blood drained from the young woman’s face and she turned in the other’s direction. Alexandria looked at her in shock just ten feet where she stood. The woman saw Lorik standing there as well and then back at Avery for an explanation. “What…what are you doing? Why is he here? Why isn’t he in his cell?” Avery figured that her friend was still in shock that anger and resentment didn’t come over yet.

“Alexandria, listen. I need to leave. I’m sorry. I don’t belong here.” She tried to usher Lorik closer to the rover; hoping that she could leave without confrontation.

Hearing the click of a gun, she stopped once again, realizing it wasn’t going to end peacefully. Holding her hands up, she moved back around to her friend. “Alexandria, please.”

Alexandria glared angrily as she kept her pistol on her. “You have to be fucking kidding me?! You’re abandoning us and helping one of them?!”

Avery knew she was running out of time. She had to get out of here. “I don’t want to hurt you. Alexandria, please!” She looked back at the rover in desperation.

Alexandria didn’t move. “You’re not leaving this place! You’re a traitor! They will feed you to the Rachni with him for this.”

“They will probably feed you too.” Lorik objected.

Alexandria turned her attention to the Turian with her gun aiming squarely at his chest. “Shut up,
Suddenly, there was a gun shot and before Alexandria had a chance to act, she felt a sharpening pain in her chest where a bullet pierced her flesh, hitting her heart. Her eyes fell upon Avery who was standing there, aiming her own pistol at her. Groaning, blood trickled out of the right corner of Alexandria’s lips and her lifeless body slumped to the ground with her own weapon falling out of her hand. Her body made a thud as it hit the ground and Avery stared down at her, her finger trembling on the trigger. “Good shot.” Lorik looked her way.

“I wish I didn’t have that choice.” Avery moved away and entered the rover with the Turian still behind her. “You know how to drive this?” Another reason she needed him and a gamble on her part. Rovers were not essential on Omega nor the Citadel, so it had been ages since she drove one.

“Yes.” Lorik eased into the driver’s chair and initiated the systems.

“Just floor it and get out of here. We only have five minutes till they are on us.”

“Then I suggest you hang on.” The Turian punched the throttle and the rover bolted out of its parking spot towards the garage doors. The doors rose up to allow them entry into the dark snowy mountain pass, then closed behind them. The rover’s wheels tore through the snow as Lorik steered it down the mountain pass.

Avery tried to buckle herself in as much as she could from all the bouncing and held onto her seat beside him. “How can you see in the dark like this?” She yelled over the rover’s loud engine.

“It has an infrared guided system. If there are no avalanches or pitfalls, we should be fine.” He yelled back.

“You know a back way into Port Hanshan?”

“Yes, but we are not going there yet.”

“What?!”

“Your friends will expect that. I know more passes away from the port. We can hide there for a day. The onboard life support system will be able to handle that with two occupants even with the snowstorm.”

“They are not my friends!” Avery didn’t like the idea of being out in the snow with this strange Turian. She wondered if she had a problem making smart choices about people. First Jones, then Alexandria and now Lorik Qui’in. She thought back to the very ill Salarian that they left behind. “I feel bad leaving Anoleius up there.”

“Don’t.” Lorik didn’t bother to look her way as he drove. “Everyone is better off without him.”

Avery looked down at her omni tool. The window was up and now Cerberus was on to the prisoner escape, her friend’s death, the stolen rover and her disappearance. If she wanted to cut ties with Cerberus, this was one way of doing it. She looked back behind her as if she could see through the metal rear of the rover back at Peak 15. “What about this other place you are taking us?”

“It’s a cave a few miles East. A few miles beyond that is an abandoned outpost. The storm is picking up and will make perfect cover us. They will have a challenging time tracking us for now. We can stay there like I said and then I can show you the back entrance to Port Hanshan. The maintenance
team has their own garage in the lower section.” He finally looked over at her. “Why did you do this?”

“I’ve seen failed experiments first hand on Omega. I didn’t want to be in that spot again.” Avery relaxed a little in her seat, feeling more at ease with her new company.

“No. Why did you save me?”

“They said they were going to use you first in their tests. Plus, I needed a ride.” She admitted freely.

“Then my gratitude, human.”

“Avery.”

He nodded his head curtly. “Avery it is.

“Once we get to Port Hanshan, you have an idea on getting us off here?”

“I have a private ship that has not been seized. I can fly it. Where are we going?”

“We can’t go to Earth…” Avery paused as she thought back to Shepard. “The Citadel is too far. I’m not sure…”

“I guess nowhere is safe right now.”

“I’d almost rather risk the Reapers than Cerberus.”

“Agreed.”

“Omega?”

He twitched his mandible as the name of the place almost seem to offend him. “That will do…for now.”

Avery softly chuckled. “I can’t believe I’m going back there.”

“Unless a more suitable alternative comes up.”
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

All hell breaks loose on Earth and Omega.

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 47

THIRTY EARTH HOURS LATER…

Her body ached all over and she knew she had suffered serious internal injuries. Krysta groaned as she fought through the pain, reaching out with her bloody fingertips to her pistol. Sitting up, she winced, realizing that the blast she endured caused several fractured ribs. Her head was pounding. In her ear piece, she could hear chatter on her radio between Coates and another officer. Where was everyone else? Where was Anderson? Burnt vehicles were everywhere along with dead soldiers, but no sign of Harbinger. The beam’s glow made it difficult to see as it blinded her eyes. Her body begged her to just stop fighting. “Move your ass.” She huffed to herself through her teeth. She didn’t have her old superior officer at boot camp screaming down at her, so she had to do it herself. She had to get to the beam no matter what. Her armor was torn exposing some of her bloody skin. Dragging her feet, she limped the best that she could to get closer. She found it oddly hard to maneuver. Pain sharp as needle pricks radiated up through her legs to her hips. Even if she had to crawl on all fours, she would do it to stop Harbinger and the Reapers. She was too close now. Everyone was counting on her. Thousands of men and women sacrificed their lives just for this moment. Their deaths would not be in vain. A Marauder rose up from the debris blocking her direct route, aiming its weapon on her. “Shit…” Krysta aimed her pistol the best she could and opened fire.

Aria T’ Loak stared down at the opened crates with a look of disappointment on her purple face. She didn’t bother to kneel to inspect the stock that was brought to her in one of her private rooms where the representative from the Eclipse came alone with the merchandise in question. The red pigmented skin Salarian stood there with a wide grin on his face as if he truly believed that what he showed her cleared whatever transgression was brought to her attention. “What’s your name again?” She curtly asked.

“Taemin Pazmon.” The grin on his face didn’t falter. Bray remained poised in the background, listening in on the conversation between the pair; dutifully waiting his next order. The issue at hand was that it was brought to Aria’s attention that the Eclipse were selling black market mods at a high price on Omega, using the current war to inflate their prices. Aria couldn’t care less about the unfair inflation, but she did care that when it came to paying their dues to her, they claimed about half of the stock they were truly selling. They were pocketing the money owed to her. The Eclipse was run by mainly Salarians since Archangel’s hit on the station and they were very conniving. They seemed to have gotten away with the offense for several months; but they recently tried to invoke a transaction on an Aria loyalist who decided that they could gain favor and money if they reported the deed. They were right. Aria paid them handsomely with a lump of five thousand credits and sent them on their way with a brand-new pistol. To add insult to injury, instead of the current Eclipse leader showing up, Vanol Haess, to defend his case, he sent someone else. “As you can see, we only have
the standard issue mods. This is all that we have left, and shipments are hard to come by.”

“You sure?” Aria lifted an eye ridge, giving him one last time to come clean.

“Of course, Aria. The information you received is false. We do not have any other mods. Did someone from the Blue Suns give you this intel?” The Salarian didn’t sweat a drop. He was so collective and calm despite the predicament he was currently in. Bray was impressed by his stature. Whenever a merc group messed up, they would crawl practically on all fours to seek redemption. However, the direction he was taking to suggest that Aria could have been deceived that easily was a fatal mistake.

A sour look flashed across the Asari’s face. “Then you are suggesting that I didn’t verify what was given to me before dragging you here.” She slowly walked over to Bray with her back to the Salarian. Bray reached behind him to retrieve the obtained pistol from his belt and handed it back to her. It was time to lay out their cards. She pivoted on her heel to hold the pistol up with a satisfying smug look. “I think this is the hottest item on this station right now.”

The blood drained from Taemin’s face and Bray almost noticed the Salarian’s bottom lip trembling. “How did you…” He stammered, nearly choking on his words.

“Pistol Piercing mod,” Aria’s blue eyes gleamed up at the barrel as she kept her finger on the trigger. “Piercing thickness up to a meter with a high-caliber barrel that can inflict…what was it, Bray?” She didn’t bother to look over at her flunky.

“Twenty-five percent more damage,” Bray smirked, finishing up her sentence. The Salarian was completed cornered now. It almost brought the Batarian pleasure knowing that even the smart Salarians could not outdo Aria T’ Loak.

Taemin cracked and he held up his hands. “Aria, I’m just the messenger!” He blabbered.

Aria lowered her eyes back to him and kept the pistol at her side, her finger remained on the trigger. A sadistic smile spread across her glossy lips. “Come now, Taemin. You think I was going to shoot you with this pistol?”

Taemin stood a little straighter, still wincing in the face. “I…I’m glad to see that you would not do that.”

Bray noticed Aria’s eyes move to his direction for a second before returning to the Salarian. That was his cue. Sighing under his breath, Bray took a step towards the Eclipse merc. The poor bastard didn’t take notice. Aria’s feign smile of truce vanished and cold aggression took over. “You are the messenger, so I will send a messenger back to Vanol.”

“Of course. What would that message be, Aria?”

“Bray.” Aria spoke the Batarian’s name.

Before the Salarian had a chance to catch on what was going to happen next, Bray lifted his own pistol, took aim and nailed the Salarian square in the chest. A gasp of both pain and shock came out of the amphibian like alien before he staggered back. His hand grasping at the puncture wound of
where the bullet dwelled in his chest cavity, piercing his heart. His large bulbous black eyes gaped at Bray and Aria as blood gushed over his hand. He dropped to his knees and then fell face forward onto the cold metal floor, dead. “Get this stench out of my sight.” She hissed, her eyes glowering down at the deceased Salarian as blood pooled from his torso.

Before Bray had a chance to move in, an alarm blared over his omni tool. “What is it?” Aria looked his way.

An Asari’s distressed face displayed on the holo image. “Mam…we-we have incoming!”

“Cerberus?” Aria moved towards the private room’s door with Bray in tow. Bray remained quiet as he followed her. Never a dull moment on Omega it seemed any more. The mere idea of Cerberus trying to retake the station was very surprising. The Illusive Man was running from Shepard. Seizing Cronos station was a huge blow to the operation. Perhaps, this was payback. Was this retribution for Jones’ life? Did the Illusive Man care that much about his operative to track down the man’s killer? For now, Bray would not disclose the details to his employer. He remembered how pissed she was when the Collectors came to the station by the Suns’ invitation. A very dangerous enemy to reckon with. If she found out that Cerberus was back due to his involvement, she would space him after she fileted him.

“Goddess, I wish.” The Asari blabbered on. “I had to double check the readings to be sure.”

“You’re pissing me off.” Aria growled as she entered the night club once more, being drowned out by the loud pulsing music.

“Reapers, mam! We detect three vessels: One Processor class and Two Transports. Both of those are three hundred meters tall!”

Aria remained tightlipped by the disturbing news. It took Bray several seconds to process the information. Did his ears deceive him? The war was coming to Omega, whether, he liked it or not. “Aria!” He spoke up loudly.

“Aria!” He spoke up loudly. “Get the canons up and running. Make sure our shields will hold.”

“You heard her. Do it!” Bray screamed at the holo image before closing his omni. “We need to get to the bunker and initiate the blast shields!”

“You runnin’, Bray?” Aria shook her head.

“We barely held up against Cerberus ships!” He shot back.

“This is my station and I won’t let the Reapers have it.” Aria motioned the Salarian disc jockey nearby to cease the music. The rhythms came to a sickening stop and the club went into complete silence. “Listen up!” Aria moved towards the front of the booth that overlooked the dance floor where hundreds of the patrons looked her way for answers. “The Reapers are here. Grab any weapon you can find and be on full alert. We will drive these fuckers back!”

The club erupted into chaos as mass panic originated with the patrons charging towards the doors that led onto the streets. People were shoving each other out of the way to seek arms or refuge from their impending attackers. Bray shook his head in silence as he watched it all unfold below. Within fifteen minutes, the entire club was vacant, and it felt like only she and he were the only ones there. Aria remained at her original position with her hands holding onto the rail. “Bray, check back in and see how much time we have.”
No sooner did she finish her statement, that the entire station shook, knocking them to the ground from the quakes. There were several explosions, then screams of horror outside followed by intense gunfire. Aria clambered to regain her footing, her eyes wide in rare form as she looked Bray’s way. “They are here.” Bray growled as he rechecked his magazine clip and rechecked his clips that he had on hand. “We need to get to the armory at the bunker before it’s destroyed. We won’t last with three clips.”

“You mean you won’t last.” Aria reminded him firmly. “I can deal with them.” A purple aurora surrounded the Asari as she mustered dark energy into her fists.

Screams were heard close by then the sickening sounds of Reaper forces dragging their victims to their demise. Bray tapped his omni tool to close the club’s blast doors to block out any from getting inside for the time being. “We need to get to the bunker. We can hold our position better there.”

Aria hated to admit it, but Bray was right. “I just got my couch back,” She grumbled as she motioned him to take the lead.

Bray moved towards the back of the club that would lead them to the streets to the bunker. No matter how they faced it, they would have to endure the streets and possible Reaper forces to make it to the secure bunker. Anyone on Aria’s team would realize that this would be the fallback point without her signal. They would be at the ready. He paused at the door and looked back at his boss. Aria took out her own submachine gun and nodded her head. The pair moved outside and so far, there were no enemies around. It seemed like they were in the clear.

After zigzagging through some of the back alleys, Bray stumbled in his tracks and nearly tripped as he shoved his boots hard on the ground to stop his momentum. Both sets of his eyes fell upon a reaperfied Batarian that was feasting on a deceased Turian corpse. The large gaping mouth dripped with blood and torn flesh as its long claws tore into the body exposing blood vessels and muscles. A very gruesome sight. “What the fuck…” Bray was lost at words at the monstrosity.

His words caught the attention of the Cannibal and it reared its ugly head in their direction. It slowly rose up and lumbered towards them, growling loudly. “Shoot it!” Aria ordered as she aimed her submachine gun towards the menacing creature and pulled the trigger. The rounds ripped through the Cannibal’s skin, causing it to go into a violent wail. It continued its course before succumbing to its injuries and collapsing on the ground. The gunfire caught the attention of three more Cannibals in the vicinity. Bray opened fire, using his incendiary ammo to spark one up in flames, while he went to torch a second. The fire engulfed cannibals squealed loudly in a horrific tone before falling over into smoldering rubble. Aria used dark energy to throw the remaining Cannibal over the railing into the dark abyss of the station.

Just when they thought they were back in the clear, a terrible shriek entered the air. “What the hell is that?” Aria yelled over the cacophony.

Bray took his free hand to try to stop the horrible noise hitting his ears without success. From their left approached the grotesque twisted reaperfied Asari known as a Banshee. Its dark sunken eyes stared at them as its form moved closer with intent to kill on its face. “Holy shit!” He screamed by the sheer sight of it.

The sight of what her own fate may be sent a chill up Aria’s spine. “I’m going not down like this!” She squeezed the trigger at the Banshee.
Chapter 48: The Dark of You

Chapter Summary

The Reapers arrive on Noveria. Can Avery make it out of there alive?

Krysta squares up against the Catalyst. What will her final decision be?

Chapter inspired by "The Dark of You" By Breaking Benjamin

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 48
“The Dark Of You”

A hard nudge to her shoulder made Avery’s eyelids flutter open. A bit disoriented, she slowly rose up to gather her surroundings and realized that she was still inside the abandoned outpost outside Port Hanshan. Lorik Qui’in seemed to almost be pacing as he waited for her to come to. “We need to move.”

Becoming alarmed, Avery jumped up from the floor onto her feet. “Did Cerberus find us?”

Lorik motioned her to follow him towards the building’s garage where their rover was parked. “Worse.” As if on cue, a huge explosion could be heard nearby, followed by several smaller ones.

In a panic, Avery raced to the door. “What was that?!”

Lorik roughly grabbed her arm, pulling her back. “Stay back! Are you crazy?!”

There was so much urgency in his voice that it terrified Avery.

She quickly withdrew from him and stepped back. “Wh-what’s going on?!”

Lorik motioned her over to the security monitor display. In the distance was the barely seen structures of Port Hanshan. Looming over the fiery destruction were two Reaper Transport ships. The Reaper’s arms moved slowly for adjustment. Avery held her mouth to prevent any petrified screams from coming out. Lorik stood next to her and whispered, “It’s too late for them. It seems that perhaps my capture by Cerberus was fortuitous.”

Trembling uncontrollably, Avery moved away from the display towards the garage once more. “We can’t stay here!”

“Where are you going?!”

“They will find us if we stay here! We need to move!” Avery picked up her pace into a quick sprint.

Lorik was on her within seconds, grabbing her arm roughly once again. “Girl, don’t be stupid. You go out in the rover and it will draw their attention here next! We need to stay here.”

“Is there any way out of here besides the way we came?” The mere concept of being trapped in this place scared Avery. If the Reapers came for them next, would they be cornered?
“There’s another passage on the backside of the facility. There may be at least one more rover there.” He pondered their next move. Avery had to give him props that he seemed very collective despite their current situation. The young woman’s heart was pounding in her chest and her legs felt wobbly as anxiety consumed her. She wanted to get far away from here.

“What about Peak 15?” She blurted out. It wasn’t ideal, but it may be their only hope since the inhabitants were so confident that they were safe deep within the mountain.

“How ironic…” Lorik answered grimly with his mandible twitching. His mind settled upon the same. “This way.” He led her through the outpost rooms until they reached the back garage. Luckily, a smaller rover was still parked.

The rover had seen better days. Dents were all over its armored frame and scorch marks. Its appearance didn’t make things any better. “You sure this will run?”

“One way to find out.” Lorik opened the door and stepped in. Avery waited outside. A few minutes later, the rover came to life and the action sparked a glimmer of hope to escape the hell that awaited them. The brown Turian popped his head out of the doorway. “Come now.”

Avery stepped inside and strapped herself in the seat next to him. Doubt clouded her mind. She glanced back at the still opened door. “You sure we should leave this place?”

“Once the Reapers are done with the port, they may scout the area for any signs of life. This place is not well hidden and will be their first spot.”

“They will eventually reach Peak 15 though…” The situation appeared hopeless to Avery. She wanted to hug her knees to her chest and cry.

“It will give us some time left. We do not have enough life support to sustain us in the rover till the Reapers are gone and there’s another outpost at least a three days ride out. We still must go over the mountain pass past Peak 15 to get there. The alternative route we are taking should keep us under Cerberus’ radar. We will reach the facility at the side entrance. The mountain ridge should hide us till we get there.”

“Then we need to give it a shot…but let’s find the other outpost. I don’t want to stay with Cerberus. The further away from this place, the better.”

“We may be the two last remaining lives on this planet once this is over with.” Lorik contemplated as he opened the garage door to start their trek.

“We are stuck here?” Avery couldn’t look the Turian in the face as she asked the question. Her own mortality was something that she never really thought and the notion that in the hours or days to come she would be killed or turned into a husk was something that no person should have to deal with. She was too young and not ready to die.

This time, Lorik Qui’in remained quiet as he proceeded to drive the rover out of the garage into the harsh cold environment once again. In the distance, they could hear the endless destruction of Hanshan as the Reapers laid waste to the once thriving port. Avery didn’t want to think about the poor individuals inside being torn apart by the Reaper forces or hiding in whatever areas they could to await their last moments before facing their inevitable fate.

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Shepard’s heart was heavy with the loss of Captain Anderson. The Illusive Man somehow had the means to control her actions. He had her shoot Anderson down with her own pistol. Her old XO
now dead technically by her own hand. The blood on her face was dry and her body still shook from her own bullet wound that she obtained from the Marauder at the beam. Her right hand remained over the hole in her abdomen to sustain pressure. It wasn’t fatal, but it could be if she didn’t have medical attention soon. Her head pounded with the most intense pressure she ever felt. The sensation was strenuous that it caused her to shut her eyes due to the blurry vision. The origin of the head pain was foreign to her. Was it the feeling of her body slowly dying? She groaned as she used her other left hand to apply her thumb and first finger around her nose to relieve the pressure at the corner of her eyes. The glare from the Catalyst’s form was not helping matters. Did she really engage in a conversation with this anti-being? Its answers sounded so simple yet complex at the same time. While it spoke to her, her head throbbed, and she could almost feel a tingle sensation up the back of her spine to her cerebral cortex. A mixture of inaudible whispers spoke to her, almost on top of the Catalyst’s words, which made it even more difficult to try to comprehend. Her brown eyes looked beyond the smaller entity to where the energy harnessed raged through a centralized location. Then she glanced over to her left and then to the right to try again the explanation of all her options. There was no room for any type of marginal error. She would only get one shot at this and the fate of the entire galaxy depended upon her. When she arrived at the Citadel, her motive was clear: To end the Reapers. To not only drive them back to dark space for where they came, but to rid of their entire existence. To ensure that future generations wouldn’t have to endure what everyone faced. Now after speaking with the Catalyst, she doubted if destruction was the correct path. The childlike form pointed out alternatives: Control and Synthesis. However, it stated it was up to her to make the final decision. Groaning from the intense pressure in her head, Krysta winced as she thought back to all the details. “Damnit…I need Anderson.” She always took his counsel to heart. She didn’t always agree with him right off the bat, but after all they handled together, she never would doubt his judgment again. Tapping her ear comm, she sought out the next important thing to her Alliance thinking. “Admiral Hackett, this is Shepard.”

“You won’t be able to communicate with them,” The Catalyst interrupted her. “The frequency has too much interference.”

“Shit.” Krysta growled as she was back to square one, looking at each path carefully. “Okay…” She took a slow deep breath regain her composure. “I can do this.” Her eyes first moved over to the left where the console was to give her the option to control the Reapers. “The Illusive Man could have been right after all. Maybe he was really on to something….” She then panned over to the middle. “Synthesis definitely would end the conflict between the organics and the synthetics. Look at how long the Quarians were at war with the Geth…” Finally, her eyes rested upon the first decision. “Destroy was the goal since day one…, but maybe that was wrong. I do that, and the relays are gone including all synthetic life.”

“You are partly synthetic too since your recreation by Cerberus,” The Catalyst pointed out again, a firm reminder of her own fate.

Selfishly, she didn’t want to die, but that was the choice she made when she became an Alliance soldier. Her job was to protect others, even if it meant to make the ultimate sacrifice. “I have died before…” She shot back to it and herself. Closing her eyes, she took another breath and slowly exhaled. “I have to do this…” She tightened her grip on her pistol and took a step forward.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” The Catalyst finally interjected its own opinion into the matter. It picked up on what choice she made. “The peace won’t last. Synthetics and Organics will be at war once again. The relays will be destroyed. You won’t be able to save Bray once the war breaks out.”

“How the hell do you know that?” Shepard shot back defensively. The idea of not being able to save Bray started to sway her.
“We have been watching you Shepard. You sparked our interest. No one could oppose the Reapers before now. Therefore, we are giving you the choice. We need purpose.”

The explanation was logical enough, but it still bothered Krysta to know that if she chose to destroy the Reapers, it didn’t mean there would continue to be conflict and more lives would be lost. She bit her lip and glanced back at Synthesis and Control options. “Maybe, destroy is not the best answer, huh?” She tossed out casually to it.

“Yes.” The ghostly form quickly replied.

Krysta took another breath. “My other two options will have me die…. I knew this was a one-way trip. Synthesis will guarantee peace.”

“Organics will ascend.” The Catalyst chimed in enthusiastically.

Krysta glanced down at it. “You almost talk like Harbinger. “She shook her head. “I cannot force synthesis on everyone. Everyone must have a choice. That leaves… option A.”

“Control.”


“He could not control us.”

“Like I could.”

“We believe that you can.”

“And there will be peace?” Shepard pried.

“Yes.”

“Any chance that I can live through this?”

“No. Your memories will be merged with the Reapers. Your physical form will be sacrificed, but you will still have your mind with theirs.”

“Great…like a consensus.” Krysta let her eyes linger back over to the path for destruction. “Am I sure about this?” Suddenly, the throbbing headache came back even stronger, causing her to cry out. She gritted her teeth and covered her eyes to try to overcome the wave of nausea that struck her hard like a missile.

“Shepard, you must hurry.” The Catalyst chided her. “You are running out of time. The Reapers are not only at Earth.”

“What do you mean?” Krysta opened her eyes to look back at it.

“The Reapers have moved some of their forces to Noveria and Omega where your friends are.”

Shepard’s heart stopped by the mention of Omega. “My friends?”

“Avery is on Noveria and Bray is on Omega. If you do not decide soon, their fates will be sealed.”

“You said the Reapers are yours,” Krysta snapped back sharply. “Can’t you fucking them stop them?!” Adrenaline pumped in her veins as she felt her chest heaving rapidly.
“No.” The Catalyst’s tone was opaque, absent of emotion. “Only you can.”

Krysta felt hot tears in her eyes as she casted her eyes back towards where the tools were for control. Not giving away her choice, she stepped in its direction, pushing her body to keep moving, despite the subconscious hesitation that tugged at her like an anchor. She could feel the Catalyst watching her intently with quietness. The headaches were subsiding with each step and she almost felt the pain draining from her body. Was this ultimately the right choice? With each step, she could see the faces of her crew, remembering old times. First it started off with recruiting Garrus after running into Dr. Michel’s office. She didn’t want him on her team due to being a Turian, but Kaidan talked her into it. She was so glad to listen to her former lover. A few steps more then her memories switched over to Wrex. The burly Krogan squaring off with the Krogan’s bouncer at Chora’s Den. Step, step. Liara facing off with Benezia on Noveria. Step, step. Tali obtaining the data she needed about the Geth for her pilgrimage after the incursions. Step, step. Ashley rushing towards her with Geth on her tail on Eden Prime. Step, step. Kaidan admitting his feelings towards her on the Normandy. His warm dark eyes looking up on her. Step, step. More images pouring quicker: Miranda, Jacob, Samara, Thane, Mordin, Jack, Zaeed, Grunt and Javik. Just as she reached the electrified glowing rods in front of her, her memories paused on Bray. She smiled, reminiscing their first encounter on Omega and how she wanted to rip him a new one with a singularity, then her memories faded into their first kiss. She could almost now see him fighting for his life on Omega against the Reaper Forces. He had to be still alive. She would make sure of it and always keep him alive. “Bray, I love you…I will become the dark of you.”

Grabbing the first control rod with her left hand, she felt the power surging through her body and the sudden rush of pain frightened her. She rejected the instinctive motion to recoil her hand and met it with her right hand grabbing firmly onto the other rod. The feeling was intense, and she gripped the rods tighter, bearing down on her teeth. She would not give up now. She could do this. Closing her eyes tightly, she didn’t want to watch what would happen to her body and blocked the sensation to open her eyes and let go. Fear consumed her, but a new voice called to her. It was faint and beckoning her. She could almost consciously feel her body fading away into nothingness, then just as she gave into the temptation to open her eyes, her entire world went black.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

The fallout after Shepard's choice.

Inspired by "Without You" By Breaking Benjamin

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 49

The outdated rover pushed through the snowy mountain pass, losing traction only slightly as it continued its vertical climb towards Peak 15. The maintenance pass was narrower with sharper drop off points. The infrared guided system was the only way Lorik could keep the vehicle staying on course due to the blinding snowstorm that picked up intensity. It was not the time for the planet’s notorious hazardous weather to come into the mix. Beads of sweat formed on his brow as his talons gripped the steering controls tighter. The rover bumped along rocks that broken free from the mountain over time and fell onto the path. Avery gasped loudly as she held onto her seat, feeling the rover lift nearly three feet off the ground from the bump. So far, the Reapers didn’t detect their presence.

The Cerberus overrun facility was becoming closer in their viewport as they went around a bend. “Thirty-five hundred meters!” Lorik announced excitedly. “We’re going to make it.”

Suddenly an alarm blared loudly within the rover’s interior. Avery held her hands over her ears to block out the excruciating sound. “What is that?!”

“We have incoming!” Lorik glanced down at the proximity alert system to see a blip come on the screen. Seconds later the details came out. “Spirits!” He pulled back the rover’s throttle and engaged the braking system. The vehicle jerked by the sudden stopping, causing it to lose control and go into a spin. “Hang on!”

Avery screamed as she felt her body moving from side to side violently with the spin. Her seat restraint keeping her in place. The front tip of the rover struck the side of the mountain pass, quickly deaccelerating their vehicle before it further drove into the side, stopping it completely. Alarms continued to ring inside the cabin. Lorik groaned from the disorientation and then went to the system controls to assess the damage. A few seconds later, the alarms quit, but his talons continued to feverishly glad over the controls. “Spirits…this can’t be happening,” He muttered frantically in his chair.

“What is it?” Avery asked him.

“The impact brought down the shields, but we should gain fifty percent back shortly. That, I’m not too worried about.” He then switched the display back to the screen that revealed the origin of their chaotic event. A capital class Reaper ship descended from the blackened sky and perched right on top of Peak 15! Its massive form dwarfed the other vessels that were at Port Hanshan by five times. A terrible horn sounded from the creature again and then a bright red laser protruded down, tearing
into the facility. The destruction created a quake that rocked down the mountain passes. The exterior metal of the rover scraped against the mountain side causing even more damage and dropping the shields to five percent.

“Oh my God! We need to get out of here!!!” Avery quickly leaned over to take control of the rover.

“I agree,” Lorik swatted her hand away as he regained his composure. “That thing will cause an avalanche!”

“We can’t go to Port Hanshan!” Avery finally had enough. She couldn’t hold it together any longer. Tears streamed down her face as sheer anxiety overcame her.

Lorik winced as he watched her break down in the seat next to him. “Come now, human. Don’t be weak like that. There’s an old saying that humans should be like a rock…” He paused. “Not sure why though. Rocks are not very mobile and heavy.”

Avery sniffed to try to make herself calm down as she glanced his way. Sitting up straighter in her seat, she turned to address him, but was cut off from the blare of the Reaper’s horn again on the peak. The nightmarish sound was followed by more explosions at the facility. She closed her eyes tightly and covered her ears again with her hands. “Why won’t this end?!”

Omega’s artificial lighting seemed to dissipate as the streets became more and more swamped with Reaper forces. Gun fire and screams could be heard on every corner. Bray panted hard to catch his breath as he and Aria moved quickly around another corner to evade the husks that were close behind. There were so many now that the husks were almost crawling on top of one another to get to their prey. The waves of husks were followed by Cannibals and a few Banshees loomed close behind. Their screams echoed throughout the streets.

Eying a narrow alley, Bray grabbed Aria’s hand and jerked her along behind him. “This way!” Their heavy breathing momentarily was the only sound that could be heard as they squeezed their way through the alley towards more backstreets of Omega. Once satisfied that they could spare the time to stop, Bray took a moment to assess their damages. He was down to his last clip and his armor had seen better days. His kinetic barriers were down to ten percent. Several deep lacerations were on his face from husks that swamped him earlier in the fight.

“Damnit!” Aria threw her submachine gun down after checking the clip to realize she was empty. She reached behind her to retrieve her pistol that she kept on her back waistband. Confirming that it was fully loaded, she looked his way. Her clothes were torn at various places and she had a deep gash on her right arm and a laceration on her left leg. Only by seeing her current appearance, did Bray realize how serious trouble they were in. Aria never dirtied herself in a fight. She was that good when she went up against her foes. Seeing her taking damage was disheartening.

“We’re too far from the damn bunker,” Bray wiped the mixture of blood and sweat off his face with the backside of his hand. “I don’t know what else we will be up against in that direction.”

Aria shot him an angry glare. It was a hard pill to swallow, but they were screwed. She tapped her comm piece. “What’s the status on the bunker? I need everything operational.” Silence was her answer back. She sideways glanced at Bray and then spoke again, “This is Aria. I need someone to respond now, damnit.” Deadly silence was still her answer.

“Communications may be down.” Bray offered a slight glimmer of hope.
“They are dead.” Aria flatly argued. “Fuck. I thought Shepard was going to handle this.”

“She is.” Bray bit his tongue as hard as he could. Was this what Earth was like? “We need to get off the station.”

“I’m not leaving.” Aria hissed. “I did that once and almost didn’t get it back from Cerberus.”

“We can’t win like this.”

“No. We can. We need to get to the bunker. Move your Batarian ass.”

Groaning in aggravation, Bray continued through the alley, zigzagging their way through the backstreets. “We should clear Gozu soon.”

“Wasn’t Mordin’s clinic there?”

“Yes.”

“We need to stop there for supplies.”

A dark shadow loomed over the station and then a Capital Reaper class vessel landed up ahead. Its form was so large that when it landed, the entire station shook hard, knocking them to the ground. Bray’s face smacked into the cold metal floor, making him dazed momentarily. Suddenly, the eerie wail of more Banshee picked up as two of the twisted Asari creatures moved in their direction from behind. Aria and Bray exchanged looks of defeat. Their bodies overly exhausted physically and mentally. Bray knew with the limited ammo he had, he couldn’t endure another battle with too many foes, especially Banshees. Aria could last a little longer given her biotic strengths, but even that wouldn’t last forever. “I’ll do my best to hold them back.” Bray took a step forward to put himself between Aria and the Banshees. “Get to the bunker.”

“Bray,” Aria sounded irk as she spoke his name. It seemed like his chivalrous act almost offended her. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Get to the bunker. You can get the station organized.” Bray kept his eyes on the approaching Banshees. Their skeletal smiling faces leered at him as their long bony fingers draped by their sides. Taking a breath, Bray aimed for the one on the left and opened fire. The rounds only seemed to irritate it as it struck. The Banshee screamed in rage with the other joining in. The one on the right launched a biotic orb that was up on the Batarian within seconds. He dove to dodge the attack but was not fast enough and the orb caught him square in the chest. The blast sent him falling up against debris, his shields completely depleted, his armor cracking against the metal objects. His head snapped back and he momentarily lost consciousness. His eyes quickly reopened, and he coughed blood. Knowing he was in trouble, he attempted to get back up, but pain generated throughout his body.

Aria jumped into the fight and launched a reave attack against the first Banshee. It screamed at its new opponent and moved in closer. Aria aimed her pistol and activated the cryo rounds. Hitting key points throughout the Banshee’s body, the physical form froze and then shattered to the ground in multiple pieces. The second Banshee was up on her within seconds, picking her up off the ground with its arms. It’s face just inches away from hers as if Aria was looking at her own demise. The Asari squirmed to break herself free from its grasp. She stared into its hollow eyes. “Let me go, you ugly bitch!”

Coming more to his senses, Bray saw the scene in front of him and struggled to get up from where he was thrown. “Aria!”
A Reaper transport ship landed right outside the outpost blocking the rover’s path between that structure and Peak 15. “Look out!” Avery screamed at Lorik and once again the rover came to a grinding halt.

“This doesn’t look hopeful.” Lorik checked his gauges. “There are no other paths near us!”

“Go somewhere!” Avery tugged frighteningly at his arm.

“Down the cliff?!” Lorik moved his arm away. “It’s too cold for their forces to get to us.”

The ship hatch opened and out poured at least fifteen husks. Their synthetic hardened forms iced over, but they continued to trudge through the snowy conditions to their prey. Lorik gasped out loudly in surprise as the husks were on top of their rover within seconds, banging on the hull, clawing their way the best they could. Their fingers scraping against the sheet metal.

Avery screamed and covered her head, she moved to find her pistol that was stashed nearby. Lorik stopped her. “You open that hatch and they will flood us!”

“What are we going to do?!” The woman’s entire demeanor was at def con.

Lorik eyed the viewport again to the cliff just to the side of their rover. “If we go back up the mountain, that thing will obliterate us. If we go forward, we will go straight into their horde and they will break in here. Down the mountain the hard way?”

Avery gulped at the treacherous cliff that was in display. The end was nowhere in sight. “H-how far down is it?”

Lorik shrugged. “Where’s your sense of adventure?” He sat back down at the controls, trying his best to remain calm and ignore what was happening outside their vehicle. “Put on your restraint.”

Avery’s fingers shook as she desperately tried to comply with the request, but her body’s quivers made the simple task difficult. Lorik moved his hand over to assist. “It’s been a good run, human. Thank you for making my boring life have some spark to it.”

Avery returned a faint smile. “You’re welcome.”

Lorik turned the rover’s wheels to position towards the direction of the cliff. The edge clearly in the viewport now. Avery’s heart beat rapidly as she reached over with her left hand, clutching his right hand tightly, ignoring the sharp prick of the talons grazing against her flesh. “Do it,” She choked as she winced with her eyes shut tightly. She could hear Lorik taking a breath.

A bright blue flash of light made Avery open her eyes seconds later. No sooner that she did, the rover rocked hard, making her stumble around in her chair. Her head colliding with the Turian’s bony fringe. She could herself scream, then the motion stopped. The husks clambered off the rover, their menacing low growls becoming further away. “What happened?” She finally found her words.

Lorik looked down at the viewport then his gauges. “Some sort of energy disturbance …are they retreating?” The Reaper forces were pouring back into the vessel for whence they came while the other vessels were lifting to vacate the atmosphere.

“Is-it over?” Avery looked at the Turian for an explanation of what she was witnessing first hand. “Did we win?”
A chuckle came from Qui’in’s mouth. “Shepard did it! To think that I despised her years ago.”

Feeling a sense of safety, Avery relaxed more in her chair and smiled widely. “She did it! Krysta did it!” Tears of joy poured down her face as she leaned over and surprisingly gave Lorik a tight hug.

Bray stumbled, biting his teeth down through the pain that sent his body into shock. He had to get to Aria. He felt like everything was moving in slow-mo as the Banshee ominously stood, holding Aria tightly in its clutches. A sickening hiss came from its mouth as it glowered at the Asari Matriarch. A bright blue light flashed and knocked all the Reaper forces down plus anyone else. Bray was smacked back down to the ground again. Aria landed with a hard thud on the cold metal floor. The Capital Reaper ship was surrounded by the same blue electrical current and so were the other vessels that towered over the Omega skyline. The Reaper forces began to move quickly away from Aria and Bray, ignoring them.

Aria yelled out at them. “I won, you assholes!”

Bray scratched his head as he stood still to not provoke anymore pain in his body. “What the fuck happened?” His brown eyes scaled up the Capital Reaper vessel that remained still close to their proximity.

“Bray,” A mechanized voice boomed from the ship. It seemed foreign, yet familiar at the same time. “I have assumed control of the Reapers.”

“Holy shit…” Aria’s words drifted off as she recognized the voice along with him to be of Commander Shepard.

Bray nearly fell over as he looked upon the Reaper. “K-Krysta? His knees shook as he stumbled closer towards it. “You inside that thing?”

“The one you called Krysta sacrificed her physical form to bring harmony to the chaos. She has given us true purpose. Her memories will be our directive.” Shepard spoke.

“Sacrificed?” His words shook as he tried to make sense of the news. “You mean…you killed yourself?!?”

“It was a necessary means to an end. It was the only choice that made sense. The only choice to protect you.”

“Protect me? No….” The notion of knowing that Shepard was no longer alive was too hard to come to terms with. He knew that she may not live past the final push on Earth, but he never would have derived to the conclusion that she would sacrifice herself to the Reapers to save everyone, to save him. “You’re not her! I don’t believe you!”

“Don’t let your eyes deceive you. One of her memories shows you dancing with her at the VIP club on this station.” The Reaper countered.

Aria scrunched her nose his way. “You dance now, Bray?”

The Batarian’s face darkened as he hung his head. His arms at his sides. His fists clenched tightly. The muscles in his arms tense. This thing was right. Inside the killer machines lived Krysta Shepard. Why else would it engage in a conversation with him? Was it her final moments? Where would she go next? Or for that matter, the Reapers? “I didn’t want it to be like this……” His words were soft and sour, the whole scenario felt like a bad dream that he couldn’t wake up from. “The Reapers were going to be destroyed. Now I’m fucking talking to one!”
“Destroy had no guarantee that the war would end. The relays would be destroyed, and devastation would take its toll. Shepard could not save you from your impending death.”

“I’d rather be dead than her….”

“We know our purpose. We will restore what has been lost.”

“About damn time,” Aria snapped in. “I’m tired of cleaning this shit up.”

“Give her back then.” Bray ignored his employer and continued his dialogue with the Reaper.

“No.”

“You’re a powerful AI. Do your shit and bring back Shepard. If Cerberus can fucking resurrect her from being spaced then- “

“No,” The Reaper bellowed again. “We cannot comply. Shepard’s form was dematerialized with the catalyst. It has been injected to all of us. We now must leave this station.” It began to lift from its location away from Omega.

“No, wait!” Bray ran towards it. “Krysta!”

The Reaper continued its course without pause. Krysta’s mechanized voice spoke down to where he stood. “Goodbye, Bray. I’ll be watching over you.”

“No! Krysta!! I know you’re in there! Damnit!!” Bray shouted up to her, but the Reaper was gone. Screaming out in anger, Bray collapsed to his knees and punched the floor with his fist. “I can’t face the dark without you…”
Chapter 50: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Shepard's crew won't accept Krysta's fate. They are determined to find their lost Commander. Aria puts a contract out on Bray after he betrays her.

This is the final chapter to this series! I want to thank EVERYONE who took time to read this! Sorry, if this is long. I didn't want to break it up because I wanted this to be a surprise!

MASS EFFECT SOLACE
CHAPTER 50: Epilogue

One year later…. 

Pausing a block away from Afterlife, Bray took a cigarette out and lit up. Inhaling the smoke through his large nostrils, he allowed the minty flavor to cool down his throat, before exhaling the smoke back out. He was heading back to his apartment late that evening after his shift. No one could exactly tell what time of the cycle it was with the system’s dark lighting. A few shop keeps were still manning their kiosks, hoping to snag one more sell before they closed. With the war gone, crime outside Omega was depleting and that meant less weapons needed. Many vendors who made weapons their primary business quickly were out on the streets. More and more food kiosks were taking over. Life for once on the asteroid station seemed dull and almost foreign from its previous existence. Bray almost missed the announcements over the PA system for discord among the Batarian caste system or the need for security officers to counter merc attacks. The Hegemony was taken out due to the fall of Khar ’Shaan. A new government body took over. They resembled the Council and promised to work more in line with Citadel Space to strengthen relationships among their species with the Council races. An embassy for the Batarians was opened back up on the Presidium. It seemed like their historically long isolation stance was depleted.

Moving on to his residence, Bray took another puff of his cigarette as he looked around nonchalantly. Deep down he had extreme melancholy, but he did his best to hold it together. Since the Reapers’ departure from Omega, there was no more contact with the synthetic machines and no further contact with the entity that Krysta had become. Their ending was so unexpected that he wondered if he was still in shock from the fallout.

The Turian guard outside the apartment complex perked up at his post and cracked a smile from Bray’s approach. He was a pale face, white skinned Turian, with a jagged scar across his right eye.

“Thought you would never get here.”

“Why’s that?” Bray flicked the cigarette down on the ground and snuffed it from his boot.

“You don’t know?” The Krogan guard on the right chuckled deeply. His skin was a pale yellow. His wide smile revealed a few missing teeth. “What a surprise then.” He snapped his large thick neck
over to look at his Turian compatriot. “Must be nice to be on Aria’s list.”

“I’d say,” The Turian chuckled.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Bray grumbled. He really didn’t want to play their enigmatic word game.

“Go see for yourself,” The Turian motioned him inside. “She’s a looker.”

Realizing what they were finally getting at, Bray fumed. “Fuck. I can’t believe this.” He stormed past the pair to head inside the complex to his apartment. He instantly thought to Aria. She never brought up any hint of his demeanor or the need to find him someone to make him ‘lighten up.’ If there was a female waiting for him up there, then it had to be from her. No one else would give a damn.

Walking out of the elevator, he moved down the hall and saw the sleek attractive form of an Asari standing right outside his door. Her back was to him and was not dressed seductively as would an entertainer or escort. She had on a glossy black thin layered outfit that sinuated her curves perfectly. It almost resembled what Asari Commandoes would wear. Strong biotics never wore full heavy armor as a soldier class would wear. The heaviness of the armor would often hold back the full strengths of their abilities. Hearing his approach, she turned around to look at him with her deep blue ocean color eyes. “About time you arrived.”

Bray slowed his pace when he recognized the face and voice to be that of Liara T’Soni, Shepard’s friend that he met when he was with her. She was dressed differently and almost seemed to age a bit despite the falsehood of such a thing. Asari could live past a thousand so a few years were nothing to their lifespan. “What are you doing here?” Her presence was so unexpected that it could hear his question come out more guarded than he intended.

“Your apartment safe?”

Bray stopped just outside his apartment door and looked at her. “Should be. There are no cameras inside.” He touched the security panel with his right hand to be granted access.

Liara stepped in first and opened her omni tool. She walked around the area slowly, looking at her tool. Bray watched on with interest. “What are you doing?”

Liara remained quiet until she was satisfied with her scan. “Making sure it was clean,” She closed her tool and then moved towards the center of the room. The interior décor was very basic. The room contained a small couch, a makeshift kitchen and then a hall to where the bedroom was. There were no paintings on the wall nor statues sitting around. It was very plain to what she was accustomed to. “Not too bad.”

Bray sneered his upper lip and glanced around with a shrug. “I just live here.”

Liara flashed him a warm smile. “How are you holding up?”

The Batarian took out another cigarette and lit it. “I’ll manage.”

T’Soni frowned at him. “That’s your second one within the past twenty minutes.”

Bray pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and glared at her. “How did you know that? You keepin’ tabs on me?”

“I’m not alone.” Liara admitted freely. “I had to make sure I caught you away from Aria.” She sat down on the couch. “I expected to see you at the memorial two weeks ago we had for Krysta on
“Earth.”

“Why?” Bray asked darkly.

Liara’s facial expression shattered slightly by his obvious unexpected response. “I just thought since you-“

“We had a thing. Yes.” Bray cut her off. “It’s over with now. I don’t need anyone checking-in on me. I moved on.”

“Batarians are very difficult to deal with,” Liara sighed as she gently pressed two fingers on her forehead and massaged her blue skin in small circles.

“How is it out there?” Bray tossed out, directing the center of attention to something else.

Liara rose back up from the couch and glanced out the small window across from the couch. She made sure her body didn’t completely clear the drape that closed it partially off to keep by-passers from getting a look inside. “If you mean how is it outside the Terminus systems? Things are…different. Very different.”

“How so?”

“We have various Reaper patrols in different sectors to beef up security from any ‘outside’ invasion. Any pirate or merc ship heading out of the Terminus is quickly obliterated. Everyone is on edge…. I know Krysta was trying to do the right thing to protect all of us.” Liara sighed heavily and closed the drape back, the room became dark once more. “We just need her. Things can’t be worse, but everyone needs to have her back. Krysta was more than a Commander…she was a positive idol that held it all together.”

Bray looked at her with a glimmer of hope. “There a way to reverse what she did?”

“No…and even if we did, why would we? The Reapers would be at us again…Shepard’s sacrifice did create peace with them and end the war…I just thought…” Her words trailed off.

Bray caught on. “You thought she would destroy them all and that would be it?”

“Yeah.” Liara looked his way.

“Nothing has a happy ending. I learned that on Khar ’Shaan and here. You should try it sometime.” He countered as he moved towards the kitchen to grab him a drink.

The Asari remained quiet once again as she watched him briefly before finally breaking the silence. “What did Shepard tell you about Project Lazarus?”

“What the fuck is that?” Bray asked as he opened the bottle of ale and took a long gulp from it.

“When Shepard was killed by the Collectors, her body was handed over to Cerberus- “

“I remember,” He cut her off. “The Blue Suns had her body here and invited the Collectors.” Bray thought back to the fallout on Omega when Aria found out that a dangerous enemy was on the station. “She killed most of those involved.”

“The Lazarus project was donned by Miranda Lawson.” Liara continued. “It took nearly two years, but they were able to resurrect her back to life.”

Bray took another swig from his bottle and scoffed, “How can you bring someone back to life when
you have no body?” The direction she was taken seemed too far-fetched for him to fathom.

“Well, I’m sure she told you about her clone incident on the Citadel.”

The old private talks Shepard had with him were painful. Deep down inside, she feared being a clone or something else. The battle against her clone seemed to bother her even more. “Yeah. Heard she kicked it off the Normandy.”

“She did.”

Bray growled loudly in aggravation as he slammed down his bottle on the counter. “I hate all this cryptic shit. Just get to your point.”

“After the war, with some help, I was able to gather intel about the various Cerberus cells that were scattered throughout. Steven Hackett assisted me in tracking down and exposing any live active ones existing post the Illusive Man’s death. I was able to gather more details about Project Lazarus and the clone that we encountered. It seems like Cerberus had multiple contingencies…”

“What?”

“The Illusive Man kept backups for backup’s,” Liara calmly explained as she opened her omni tool to project a transparent image onto the blank wall in front of them. The image displayed multiple star charts. “Gellix came up in numerous reports.”

“Where the hell is that?” Bray stepped closer to look at the display.

“Minos Wasteland, Arrae. Jacob Taylor defected there with multiple scientists.” Liara switched the display to the raw data that she acquired. It appeared like a list of various files. “I cross referenced my findings with Jacob. The team that defected did not have access to a lab on the far side of the facility. It was locked down and the employees never mingled. After the war broke out, those scientists kept everything sealed and left. That’s why Cerberus came back to the facility to take out Jacob and his team. They were trying to clear it out to prevent anyone from going to that wing of the building…”

“What was in there?” Bray asked, his interest becoming peaked by her story.

“I sent Javik and Garrus to check it out since Cerberus has been defeated. They should have…very little resistance. I believe the Illusive Man kept another clone of Krysta there. She was never activated unlike the other.”

“Yo, sayin’ that you want to activate this clone of Shepard?” Bray didn’t have to wait for an answer. The longing in her eyes to see her old friend was enough evidence for him. He growled and shook his head. “It’s not the same.”

“I’m no geneticist, but I read the reports from Project Lazarus. Krysta’s complete memories were intact when they brought her back to life. The Reapers used Krysta’s memories for their guidance. If I can gain access to them…” She wrung her hands again nervously. “There may be still a chance.”

With the palm of his hands braced against the counter, Bray didn’t answer. He gulped as he contemplated her hypothesis. Realistically, it didn’t seem plausible, but logically, it was making sense. The hint of hope that Krysta could be back in his life was something he strongly desired, but then again, would it really be her? Liara noticed his pondering and moved closer to him. “The clone would have been manifested right during the Collector attack, which means, she wouldn’t know who you are. Not until we can get her old memories back from the Reapers somehow.”
Bray swore under his breath and then chuckled at the irony. “Why come to me then?” He grabbed his bottle roughly and took another drink. “She won’t know who the hell I am. I’m nothing to her.”

“Yes, but until the Reapers- “

“You really think they are just going to give it up?” Bray snapped at her harshly. “Information is a high commodity. I learned that living on his rock.” He then spun to directly face her. “How did you get all this anyways?”

Liara smirked knowingly. “I have my ways.”

The personal joke didn’t amuse him. He moved away from her towards the window. “You have stayed here long enough.”

“I need your help, Bray.” Liara pressed. “Like any machines, the Reapers should have different servers to where they back up the data they collect. At least the Geth did.”

“Did you find one?”

“Not yet…but James is helping with that along with Jack.”

“You’re going to be in some serious deep shit.” Bray peeked from the drape to make sure there was no one spying up at his place. “Those places would be heavily guarded.”

“We have to try. If I can get obtain the memories, I can implant them into the clone.”

“You sure this would work? Sounds like varren shit.”

“We have to try.” Liara’s voice rose with persistence. “The galaxy needs Shepard back. Once we find a server, I will need your help to infiltrate.”

“Why me?” Bray growled lowly as he moved back away from the window, satisfied that their conversation was private.

“There may be resistance…like you said. If Shepard still is in there, we will need all the triggers we can get to make her listen to reason.”

“Let me get this straight. You want me to go up to a Reaper with you, stand there and try to talk to it?” In the open? A damn Reaper?” His voice rose at the end of the sentence. “That’s fuckin suicide…it’s not just that. It’s fuckin’ crazy.”

“Krysta Shepard was always fearless. I admired her greatly ever since the first date she saved me from Therum. No matter what the odds were, she somehow managed to hold it together. She was fierce.”

Bray chuckled softly, remembering the time she held a pistol at him. “That she was.”

Liara grinned. “You up for this?”

“How long would this take?”

“Months, years…I-I don’t really know. Not until we possess the cache from the server. I’m lucky that Miranda is still alive. She is instrumental in this. I can’t request just anyone to assist. If the wrong people found out…”

“Like Aria.” Bray mumbled under his breath. “If I leave Omega now...heh, there’s no damn way she
would just let me back in.”

“It’s a huge risk.” Liara agreed. “I can find you work somewhere else.”

“No offense, Liara. I’m not a people person. I’m not going to stay on the Citadel or some cushy gig.”

The Asari smiled once more. “I have connections. I’ll know just the job that will fit you once this is over.”

“Oh?” He scoffed. “What’s that?”

The smile on her face remained and she shook her head slowly from side to side. “Nuh-uh. I’ll disclose that at the end.”

“My ass is on the line. You know that? All I got from you are damn secrets.”

“I know it’s asking a lot- “She bit her lip. “I cannot give you any more details about this until we are off Omega.”

“I’m going up against damn Reapers. I’ll be standing there allowing one to melt my ass.” He shook his head this time. “You have to tell me somethin’.”

“Aria has eyes and ears on this station. Even you know that. Someone may already have told her how long I’ve stayed in this apartment with you. We need to leave now. Once are on my ship, I’ll divulge more to you.” She reached out and gently took his hand. “You have to trust me, Bray.”

Bray cringed and panned both sets of his eyes around his apartment interior. A beat. “I’m in.”

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Taking side streets towards the docks, Bray glanced back to make sure Liara was following. Surprisingly, she was able to keep up the pace despite the twists and turns. If Aria had anyone spying on him, they would not suspect him to take the route he chosen. He didn’t see anyone outside his apartment, but it didn’t mean she would have someone monitoring outside the club and the markets. More importantly, he was positive that she would have an agent placed at the docks. He had to be swift. They couldn’t linger there. The crowds became thicker as they reached the docks’ main entrance. The place smelled of sweat and pheromones. Normal to his nose, but obviously not to T’Soni. He noticed her stiffening up her face as she took his side. “My ship is three down.” He slowed his pace to allow her take point; darting his glance around for anyone he recognized. So far so good.

Liara’s ship was Salarian built, sleek in design, but small. A brunette woman greeted the pair as they arrived. “About time you showed up. We were about to leave.” Bray noticed that the woman’s accent was much different than Krysta’s, but he couldn’t place the region. Liara remained quiet as she moved past the woman to get on board.

Bray paused. “We?”

“Bray, you did come!” An overly enthusiastic familiar female voice shouted inside the cargo hold. Where did he hear her before? Seconds later, Avery appeared. She was no longer brandishing a Cerberus operative uniform, instead had on a light body armor without any insignia, light in color. Her hair was shorter, and almost to her shoulders.

Seeing her reopened old wounds that were still festering at the seam. Growling, Bray retrieved his pistol from its holster and aimed it at her. “Taking sides again?!!”

Avery gasped and quickly held up her hands in a surrender posture. Her face ghostly white. “B-
The woman outside the ship moved to place herself between Avery and Bray. A biotic barrier engulfed her and Avery. Her dark blue eyes narrowed at him. “Back off. She’s with us.”

“Yeah right. Only when she wants to be.” Bray spat, keeping his pistol poised.

Liara hurried back down, overhearing the conflict that was taking place. “We don’t have time for this!” Her voice slightly elevated as she eyed Bray and the other women. “Miranda, stand down.” Her blue eyes back on him. “Bray, Avery is with us. She atoned by helping us take down the remaining Cerberus pockets. I trust her.”

Liara’s words didn’t strike a chord with him. Bray held his position and looked at Avery once more. “Krysta never did. Not after what she did.”

Avery finally spoke up to defend herself. “You are right to hate me, Bray…” Her voice with hope of redemption. “I failed Krysta…I should have taken her side. I was scared… and I- “

“You didn’t trust me.” Bray glared at her coldly.

“No, I didn’t.” Avery admitted.

“She’s staying with us. We have a job to do. Either you are with us or we will leave you here.” Miranda interjected as she began to usher Avery inside to cease the dialogue between the two.

Bray glanced back at the busy Omega port and sighed hard. This was it. Once he stepped inside, then he was fully committed. He couldn’t turn back. Taking a deep breath, he held his pistol still and began to move forward. One step and he heard Moklan snarling behind him, “Where are you going, Bray?”

Wincing, Bray whirled back around to see the fellow Batarian looking upon him in disdain. Noticing that Bray wasn’t onboard yet, Liara stepped down to see what was going on and lightly gasped when she saw the new threat that sprung up. Aria’s men were in the know. Bray hesitated as he looked at Moklan. The other didn’t seem like he called for backup. In fact, it almost seemed by the arrogant look on the Batarian’s face that he wanted to catch Bray in the act before saying anything further. Moklan was always that type of person. Always wanting to catch Bray slipping up to further advance himself. He almost succeeded several times, but Bray constantly found a way to get back on Aria’s good side. This time, it seemed that Bray may not be talk his way back. “This doesn’t concern, you, Moklan.”

“You didn’t answer my fuckin’ question.” Moklan motioned to the ship. He seemed to not recognize Liara T’Soni. “You runnin off again with someone else?”

Liara remained quiet, allowing Bray to take control of the situation. Bray was searching for ways to get out of this. All scenarios were leading to one conclusion and it was not one he was fond of. It would certainly seal his fate with T’Loak. Holding up his pistol with the barrel pointing on Moklan, Bray bared his sharp incisors. “I said fucking back off, Moklan. For once, stay out of my shit.”

“Does Aria know about this?” Moklan tossed back as he held his pistol back at Bray. “Should I call her?”

A bead of sweat formed on Bray’s brow and he could feel himself flinching at the name. “She doesn’t.” He admitted, keeping his voice calm. He couldn’t show that he was fearing for her reaction to all of this. However, his farce didn’t fool Moklan.
“Let’s tell her then.” Moklan devilishly grinned as he opened his omni tool to make the call.

Without even thinking, Bray squeezed the trigger, shooting Moklan square in the head. The Batarian staggered back out of quick reaction, before falling onto his back, dead. Blood covering his face and the floor from the large open bullet hole at the center of his head. Brain matter seeping through as well. The sudden aggressive attack stirred up calamity among the travelers within the port. Shrills of panic and screams were heard seconds later and then a stampede erupted as they pushed their way through to avoid any injury to themselves as well. Bray stared down at Moklan’s dead corpse and reholstered his gun. He spat saliva down at it and then turned to move in with Liara. “Let’s go.”

Liara closed the ramp and raced to the controls where Miranda was waiting. Miranda didn’t see what transpired outside, but she could hear the screams outside. “What the hell is going on!?!”

“Just go.” Liara buckled herself in the co-pilot’s chair. “No time for final checks.”

Avery watched Bray move to the passenger area to harness himself in the chair across from her. His face was twisted and dark. She too had no idea what happened. She watched him intently. “What did you do, Bray?”

The Batarian remained tight lip and darted his eyes from her. Seconds later, the ship moved away from the magnetic locks and idled back out. Avery gripped the arm rests of her seat. She always disliked take-off’s. Her eyes couldn’t leave Bray as he sat there. It had been awhile since she saw him. He looked the same, yet different. What became of him? Would this plan of theirs work? Could they bring back Krysta Shepard?

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Ten hours later…Bray felt a gentle tap to his shoulder. Opening his eyes, he saw Avery looking at him. “We are getting ready to land.”

“Where are we?” He asked tiresomely as he moved to stretch his body. Long travels were not ideal to him. He hated the idea of being confined to a cramp space. He wondered what Aria was doing at the very moment. Was she sending out mercs after him?

“Just outside Ilos.” Liara answered for her as she moved to where they were. “Should be landing in about thirty minutes.”

“Ilos?” Bray asked. He really didn’t know much about that planet. In fact, he didn’t recall hearing its name until now.

“I was here before.” Liara chuckled gently as her eyes wandered to some distant memory. “This place houses some of the oldest Prothean ruins I have seen. Saren was here to access the archives. Shepard, Garrus and I came here to hunt him down. I was so fascinated with this place. In all my research, I never what was all here. I wanted to spend hours to learn what I could. I never got the chance after we defeated Saren.”

“Why not?”

“We filtered out the remaining Geth and then the Normandy was attacked. When I thought Shepard was dead…” Her eyes lowered. “My drive sort of died along with her. I found myself obsessed with the possibility of bringing her back. I made deals I would never have dreamed of to fulfill my quest.”

“Sort of like what you are doing now,” Bray pointed out bluntly.

“Problem!” Miranda’s warning from the cabin interrupted their conversation and Liara raced back to where the woman was. Bray unbuckled himself quickly to see what was going on.
“What is it?” Liara sat down in her seat to man the controls and check the display.

“There’s a damn Reaper destroyer blocking the server facility!” Miranda exclaimed as her fingers raced over the controls. “I can’t land too close to that thing!”

Bray glared down at Liara as he held the back of her chair. “What did I tell you?”

Liara chewed her lip, ignoring him. “This has to work. Shepard wouldn’t shoot us down. She can trace our ship signal and realize that we are friendly.”

“If that’s still her.” Bray countered.

Miranda froze in place. “The Reaper has a lock on us. It knows we are here. I’ll land somewhere else.”

“It will blow us up. Get us out of here!” Bray yelled at her.

“No!” Liara shouted as she looked up at him from her chair. “We have to try! If we leave, the Reaper may think we are hostile and come after us or send more…it knows we are here. We need to land.”

Cursing silently, Bray said nothing more. Miranda maneuvered the ship towards their original destination. It would place them about three miles away from the Destroyer. “Buckle in!” Miranda ordered to him. Moving back to his seat, Bray did as he was told and looked over at Avery.

“We are going to land by a Reaper?!” The young woman became pale.

“Yeah. Shit.” It wasn’t like Bray could do anything about their predicament. He had to sit there and go for the ride.

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The Reaper Destroyer guarding the server facility seemed tall with each step they took away from their ship. It was on high alert; its body shifting slightly to adjust to whatever formula it was calculating inside its metal hull. Liara’s team streamed towards it with T’Soni taking the lead with Miranda by her side, Avery and Bray were in the back row. Liara ordered all weapons to be holstered to show no aggression. She fully believed that her friend was going to speak for the AI, but still she had to show that they were friend and not foe. Sometimes when those lines became blurred, chaos would ensue. When they were about two hundred feet from their destination, the mechanical whirring of the Reaper’s voice made them come to a grinding halt. “State your purpose on this planet.” Its loud voice thundered, absent of Krysta’s familiar tone.

Avery could hear Bray silently swearing. Any sudden movement and it could cause the Destroyer to attack. They were too close to avoid its deadly laser beam. Still, standing there and waiting for their demise was not an option to her and probably not to him either. Liara held her head up high to gaze upon the towering synthetic. “I’m Liara T’Soni, a friend of Commander Shepard. I want to speak with her.”

“Demand.” Miranda huffed under her breath. Liara ignored the brunette.

“You did not have to travel to this planet to speak with her. We have sentinels throughout.” The Reaper answered.

“True, but this planet marks the reason why we are here. I need to explain our motives to Shepard. Please.” Liara pleaded strongly.

The Reaper grew silent for a few moments. Bray began to wonder if it was warming up its attack
protocols or was it really reaching out to its colleagues in the darkness of space. “Dr. T'Soni, “The Reaper finally came back to life; this time its voice altered to mirror close to Commander Shepard’s. A small glimmer of hope to the team. “You are far from the Sol system. I don’t think Admiral Hackett sent you this far out.”

“This is not his order. I came here.” Liara’s voice shook slightly. Even she was a little rattled to know just how many tabs the Reapers had on them. “With some help.”

“Miranda Lawson, did you acquire the information you were seeking?”

Miranda gave a silent look to her team before stepping forward ahead of Liara. “Yes, Shepard. We want to help you. You helped me.”

“Help?” The Reaper’s tone was so monotone that it frustrated Bray.

Pushing between the two females, he glared hard up at the Reaper, stepping closer, leaving the rest of the crew behind. He could hear their loud gasps of shock and protest, but fear kept them at bay. He hated this. He hated this thing that Shepard became. “We want you back, Krysta. I-I need you back.”

“Krysta Shepard’s memories are stored within us and have given us purpose. She is no longer the same woman that you knew, Batarian.” The Reaper’s words were cold like its metal exoskeleton.

“Varren shit.” Bray cut it off. “This isn’t you. I didn’t know what the big fuss was over you when you were still alive. Aria saw it. Then I saw it...” He paused, breathing heavy in desperation and frustration. “This wasn’t the right choice.”

“If Shepard didn’t sacrifice herself to give us new direction, then the cycle would continue. You would not be standing here to have this conversation, Batarian. You would have ascended like all the others. Harbinger would have seen to it.”

“I would have blown my fucking brains out before it got that far.” Bray spat angrily.

“What is your purpose here?” It asked again in the same emotionless monotone voice.

Bray dropped his pistol on the ground and stretched out his arms as wide as they could go. “I need to get in that facility. You Reapers may need Shepard for whatever damn purpose you want, but we need her here too. If you want me dead, then kill me now.”

“Bray!” Avery shouted to him in fright. He could hear a slight struggle between Avery and Liara as the young girl was most likely trying to get to him to pull him away.

The Reaper remained dormant till its massive body slowly stepped aside to allow them access. The ground shook from underneath Bray’s and the others’ feet as it moved. Not allowing their chance to elude them, Bray raced first towards the facility with the others right on his heels. He knew he had somehow reached the remnants of Krysta’s memories. She was still alive in there. He had to find her.

The facility was dark and the steps at the door led down to the lower level where the air temperature seemed to drop by twenty degrees. A chill went up the small hairs on Bray’s skin as he stepped down, activating the flashlight on his pistol. He still didn’t take any chance even though the Destroyer let them get inside. Not allowing their chance to elude them, Bray raced first towards the facility with the others right on his heels. He knew he had somehow reached the remnants of Krysta’s memories. She was still alive in there. He had to find her.

The facility was dark and the steps at the door led down to the lower level where the air temperature seemed to drop by twenty degrees. A chill went up the small hairs on Bray’s skin as he stepped down, activating the flashlight on his pistol. He still didn’t take any chance even though the Destroyer let them get inside. Once below on, he moved out of the way to allow Liara and Miranda to take lead. The area was small, and the large server terminal generated a low hum along with a slight glow to the room. “This is it.” Liara moved closer to the terminal to look for the access port and activated her omni tool. “I can check my algorithms to find the right one to bypass the lock.”

“Just do it.” Bray groaned. He didn’t understand the specifics behind electronic skills and just the
terminology gave him a headache.

Miranda took to Liara’s side. “How long will this take?”

Liara lifted an eye ridge to her. “It’s not like I have hacked a Reaper server before.”

Miranda smirked. “Thought you knew everything.”

Bray remembered that Liara never disclosed more details about what she promised him once onboard her ship on Omega, but he figured now was not the time. He mentally bookmarked the memory to come to it once they left Ilos.

Avery glanced around the darkened room. “This place is so eerie. You said Saren went here?”

“Yes,” Liara glanced up briefly to address her question. “There was a bunker about twenty miles from where we landed. Tons of artifacts are still there.”

“Saren was indoctrinated.” Miranda chimed in. “I read about it when I researched Shepard’s profile. She mentioned this several times in her journals.”

“Indoctrinated?” Bray asked.

“A form of mind control that the Reapers have. They use people as their pawns. Bend them to their will. Saren was testing this on the Salarian STG soldiers on Virmire. The rapid indoctrination caused neuro decay quickly.”

“How do they get this?” Avery asked as she felt a cold chill go up her body.

“Through Reaper artifacts or technology.” Miranda took over to allow Liara to focus on the task at end. “Saren implemented the technology willingly thinking he could remain in control. Sovereign was in control of him the whole time. Shepard saw through this.”

Avery gasped and kept her mouth over her hands. “Oh God….”

“What is it?” Bray barked.

“The Illusive Man…he was using Reaper tech…him and Kai Leng…I-I was around him…” Avery’s voice cracked as she began to hyperventilate, clutching herself tightly. “I don’t want to be like him!”

“Relax!” Miranda grabbed her hand to snap her back to reality. “Any hold that the Reapers had over individuals dissipated once Shepard used the catalyst. If you were indoctrinated, you are not now.”

“So, we think…” Liara glanced up slightly from her work. “I trust Shepard…I-I just don’t trust the Reapers.”

“Was Krysta ever around Reaper artifacts or technology?” Bray asked out loud.

“Tons of times.” Liara answered. “I cannot even count it. She has a strong will and mind. If the Reapers tried, they were never successful, and Krysta was aware of the symptoms of indoctrination. If she thought she was, she would tell us about it.”

“You sure?” Bray played devil’s advocate as he pondered what he was learning. He began to think about he knew about Shepard’s death. He was told that she squared off with Harbinger right before she hit the beam to go to the Citadel with Anderson. Everyone else on the Alliance teams below were obliterated by Harbinger’s beam. However, she managed to survive. She was a tough ass for sure, but what made her change her mind?
“What are you getting at?” Miranda snapped offensively.

“I think he’s trying to state that Shepard was indoctrinated.” Liara muttered quietly. Her blue eyes glanced his way with deep concern.

“But she wasn’t!” Avery argued. “I know her. She wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Only she was up there to activate the catalyst. None of us know what she faced. All we know is that in her mind, destroy was not the best option and control.”

“Heh, I can’t believe it. The Illusive Man wanted the same damn thing. He was right after all.” Miranda sneered.

“But I thought he couldn’t control them,” Avery’s head spun. “I mean he tried, but no one can.”

“That’s my point.” Bray’s voice rose as he started to pump more energy into his theory. “What made her change her mind? Why suddenly was destroy not the better option?”

“Goddess…” Liara’s face glowed from the light of her omni tool. “If what you are suggesting….”

Miranda groaned as she began to pace. “Shhh. Calm down. That Reaper could hear us down here…” She stopped herself to glance around. “Any recording devices?”

Everyone stopped and glanced around the darkened room as best as they could with the limited light from their flashlights. “Nope!”

Miranda clasped her hands. “Shepard would never allow herself be indoctrinated.”

“Neither did some of the other victims.” Liara jabbed.

“You mean Krysta was one of them?” Avery trembled as she looked upon the trio in front of her.

“No, no.” Liara pulled herself away from her work momentarily to address the concern that came up. “Bray does make a valid point. It would make perfect sense as to why we have this outcome. Yes, it ended the war and saved lives, but did the Reapers get what they want?”

“I don’t believe this shit!” Miranda growled as she shook her head. “We can’t face them and Shepard!”

“We may not have to…let’s not jump to conclusions just yet….” Liara soothingly spoke. “We need to get this data over to Gellix. Though the upload may take…thirty hours…”

“Thirty hours?!” Bray held his face.

“It’s years of memories in raw data…that’s the fastest I can get it.” Liara chewed her lip. “We have safe passage, but I suggest not leaving the planet entirely until we get this information. We cannot let our demeanors change around the Reaper nor say anything about what we suspect. If we do, we are good as dead.”

“What do we do for now?” Avery asked.

“You three head back to the ship, bring me food and water throughout and I’ll maintain the connection.”
“I’m not leaving you here alone,” Bray shook his head.

“He’s right.” Miranda agreed. “We take turns on guard duty. I’ll take first watch.” The dark-haired woman moved around the pair to take to Liara’s side. “You two head to the ship and wait for our signal to change guards.”

Avery smiled meekly at the Batarian. “I guess it’s just you and me.”

Eight hours passed, and Bray stood outside the ship, leaning up against it, smoking a cigarette. Darkness was taking over the planet side for the night. The Reaper never moved from its guard. Its dark form seemed to merge with the black background. The air was becoming much colder and the Batarian began to shiver. Miranda radioed in twenty minutes earlier to state she would be changing out shortly. He decided to take the next shift. He remained isolated on the ship, purposefully keeping his distance from Avery. He didn’t think he could ever forgive her for what she did. Every time he saw her, he would see Jones laughing and his friend, Sh’sk, being torn apart on Sanctuary. The others were quick to forgive, but not him. Not ever. Avery came down the ramp and looked over his way. “I found a food ration kit. Did you want some paste?”

“Nah. I’m not eating that shit.” Bray huffed. He longed for a beef stick from his favorite vendor on Omega. Meat was essential to the Batarian race. His teeth needed to tear into something, not sip on processed liquid food.

Avery stepped down further to where she could see him better. “Bray, you ever going to forgive me?”

Bray looked up and noticed Miranda walking towards their direction. “No.” He moved away to take up his shift, flicking his cig to the ground.

Avery sighed as she looked on. She couldn’t blame him, but she really needed someone close to her right now. Miranda and Liara were nice to allow her to be part of the project, but they were not tied to her in any way. She was part of the Talons at one point, she was tied to Omega, just like Bray was. She needed to make that connection. She needed some familiarity in her life. Krysta was not that. She felt so alone. Seeing Miranda becoming nearer, she walked up inside the ship to grab some paste. She never had it before, but it was better than waiting at least two more days before their next meal.

Four days later...

“You finally show up. We were about to send scouts out after you.” Garrus teased the group as he and the others at Gellix greeted Liara and her team from the ship.

“You know I can always handle myself.” Liara playfully winked at the Turian before moving over where Javik quieted stood with his hands clasped behind his back. His multiple eyes watching all of them come down. Bray watched T’Soni move swiftly over to the Prothean, giving him a lover’s embrace before gently pressing her soft lips on his face. She whispered a few words, but none were audible from where he was standing.

Garrus moved to shake his hand. “Thanks for coming. I know it was hard to leave Omega. Shepard would be grateful that you were here for her.”

The gesture was unanticipated so his response to the shake was a bit clumsy and awkward. Bray quickly rubbed the back of his neck nervously as he looked among the group that stood before him.
A few familiar faces from his interactions with Krysta and some were not so complacent. James Vega moved out from the group to greet him next. “Glad to see you back.” Bray nodded his head in return.

“This is Jacob Taylor and Dr. Brynn Cole. They were part of the team that defected.” Miranda ushered him over to where another pair of humans were standing.

The woman gently smiled at Bray while holding a young boy in her arms. “Greetings. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Dr. Michel and Dr. Chakwas will assist Miranda with the procedure.” Liara pointed over to two more female humans standing to the side. One was older with gray hair and the other was a bit younger than Krysta with red hair.

“We need to be hasty about this. We cannot risk losing the information.” The woman known as Dr. Chakwas spoke up.

“That’s right!” Liara gingerly removed her omni and handed it to the woman. “The information is stored internally, and I have already begun an upload to one of my backup servers. I have granted you access to the files. Just use the digit scanner.”

“You always think of everything, Liara. Thank you.” Chakwas accepted the tool with the smile remaining on her face. “Your mother would have been proud of you.”

“It’s here, then?” Bray tried to look around the group of individuals to find where the lab may be that housed Shepard’s cloned body.

“Yeah. The cryostasis has not been disrupted and all the vitals checked out.” Garrus informed him.

“Excellent.” Dr. Michel sighed with relief.

“Kind of creepy.” James piped in. “Seeing Krysta’s body…well a body. You sure it won’t go all psycho on us like the last one?”

“That’s because Operative Maya Brooks had a part to play with that.” Miranda chided.

“Who?” Bray inquired.

“Maya Brooks…psycho chick…hot…but psycho.” James explained with a chuckle.

“Shall we begin?” Chakwas gently ushered Dr. Michel and Miranda to follow her to the labs.

“Good luck. We’ll keep guard.” Garrus turned to move to his original post.

“Right. I need to take care of the ship. Javik, has he arrived?” Liara looked over at the tall Prothean.

“He has been waiting…” The Prothean’s face soured. “And complaining.”

This aroused a giggle from the Asari. “That would be Joker.”

Bray turned to look over at Jacob. “This will work?”

The athletically built dark skinned man gave a slight shrug. “Don’t know. Project Lazarus was one thing. This is something entirely different.”

“Stay positive, Jacob.” Dr. Cole coaxed him warmly.
“Want me to show you around?” James walked up to him.

“Can I see her?”

“Uh, sure, I guess.” James motioned him to follow him.

Bray gave a silent look over at Avery before following the marine in the same direction Miranda and the doctors went. His heart rate increased with each passing step. What would he find there? Would it be the same? Could they even awaken it? Would she remember her? Would she even be the same? A hard pit formed in the bottom of his stomach.

James led him towards the lab and he could see the three women bustling around inside checking on different vitals. There was a large glass case in front of them, but their bodies deflected his entire view. Their focus was on it so that had to be the clone. James moved to open the lab door, but Miranda whirled around and shook her head. “Not now! This is too critical.”

James froze and looked back at Bray. “I guess that’s not a yes, compadre. You hungry?”

Hearing his stomach rumble in response, Bray nodded his head. “Yeah.”

“Let’s find some chow.”

Three Weeks Later…

“You still up?” Liara asked sleepily as she walked the facility’s halls that night for final check before heading to bed. She was shocked that Bray was still standing outside the lab where Miranda and the others were working around the clock. The memories were implanted in the hippocampus region of the brain. The science behind the actual process was very complex and even with all her studies, Liara couldn’t even imagine where to begin with it. Her job was to acquire the data needed and she fulfilled it. Miranda was the spearhead behind the entire project while Chakwas and Michel were there to assist and just in case there were any medical emergencies such as shock, heart failure, etc. Miranda wanted to give the brain time to absorb and process. It was like a computer. If they tried to wake Krysta up too soon then valuable key information would be lost. The only question was, what was the right time? Krysta was out of cryo but placed in a medically induced coma. They would gently bring her to her pure consciousness. Miranda gave good news a few days ago when she noticed Shepard’s rapid eye movements while she was lying on the table. She was in REM sleep and it seemed like her brain would process the memories sort of like dreams. Bray remained vigilant at his post, hardly eating, watching as much as he could.

Disturbing news was brought to Liara’s attention that day and she wanted to hold it for discussion till the following day but seeing the person she needed to speak to about it, made her change her mind.

Bray turned somberly to address her. “I’m used to staying up during the night. That’s when the fun really begins.”

“I bet Omega’s nightlife was very interesting.”

Bray’s eyes flickered with a look of remorse. His mouth opened slightly to comment, then lips tightly closed and he turned back away. Liara noted this. The subject was still painful to him and would be more after she unveiled what she recently learned. “You had a message come in this morning.”

“I did?” Bray’s interest was captured again, and he looked directly at her. He glanced down at his omni tool.

“It…was routed to my own terminal.” Liara confessed gently. “I couldn’t risk Aria tracking you with us so while you slept on the ship, I hacked into your omni tool. I scrambled its frequency, so it
cannot be traced and routed all incoming messages to several false accounts, encrypting them. The message would never be delivered per the notice to the sender.”

Normally, he would be irked if someone took upon themselves to hack into his private matters, but what Liara did was ingenious and he didn’t think about it. If she didn’t, then everything they would have risked would be destroyed by Aria and her vengeance. His presence on Gellix would be fatal. “Pretty savvy.” He chuckled, impressed by her talents. “Shepard was pretty damn lucky to find you…on Therum, you said?”

“Yeah…” Liara rolled her eyes gently as she recalled the memory. “I, uh, managed to get myself stuck in a Prothean security stasis field.”

“A what?”

“A big giant blue orb.”

Bray laughed. “That would have been amusing.”

“Yeah.” Liara mused. “Took a laser from a mining rover to get me out.” She thought back to the purpose of her meeting with him. “The message that I intercepted came from Omega…” She let her words trail off to give him the true sense of the dire situation they were in.

“That bad, huh?” Bray grunted.

Liara tapped into her omni tool to bring up the recorded message, “Bray. Word on the streets sicken me. I never thought you would turn against me and murder someone like you did in cold blood. You should know it’s not wise to fuck with me. I have hired several mercs to find your traitorous ass and bring you back here. I prefer alive, so I can enjoy your demise personally, but if you manage to get yourself killed in the process, then I won’t lose sleep over it. My wrath is coming for you. Enjoy your freedom while you can.”

The cold murderous intent of the message sent a shiver down Bray’s body. Aria was not bluffing and most likely she already deployed her best mercs to seek him down. He was sure as dead. The only question for him now was that would he live long enough to see Krysta come back to life? He thought back to his location and what was at stake. “I need to get out of here.”

“Where would you go?” Liara asked as she closed her tool.

Bray sighed hard in exasperation with his brown eyes glancing back at the lab. “I have no idea. I’ll see if I can find a remote planet nearby. They will know your ship went here.

“No, they won’t.” Liara replied knowingly. “I had Joker fly it out and we already scrubbed its credentials. It will be sold under a new name.”

“They will still find me here. Aria has the best.” Bray shook his head in defeat as his eyes lowered to the floor. “I almost need the damn Shadow Broker to get out of this one.”

“What makes you say that?” Liara played into this.

“You kiddin? Only he has that sort of power. It would take the rest of my entire creds to get away and a new alias. I may last a few more years. I would just have to risk going to a port to find one of his agents. Usually, they are there.”

“How much money do you have on you?” Liara had a huge smirk on her face and her demeanor confused him.
Caught off-guard, Bray fumbled with his omni to search his cred account. “One hundred thousand creds. Why?”

“You really think that’s enough for my services?” She continued to grin.

“Huh? What the hell are you talking about?” Bray closed his omni and gaped at her, perplexed by the strange turn of events.

“Bray…” Liara gently touched his arm with her fingertips. “Relax. I was going to tell you this on the ship, but my mind was somewhere else. Years ago, Krysta and I went up against the Shadow Broker to find my old friend, Feron. We killed him, and I sort of…took over.”

“ Took over?” He tilted his head as he scratched it with his finger. “You mean you’re…?” Liara remained silent and nodded with a smile.

This lit up Bray’s face and he couldn’t help but to snicker. “No wonder you have so much high-tech shit. You think you can hide me?”

“Even better.” Liara motioned him to follow her down the hallway. “I’m going to employ you, plus give you a new identity. Follow me to my office.”

“Employ me?” Bray grunted. “I’m not a desk jock.”

“I want someone I can trust to be my top operative. You will be tasked for deployment of my agents in the field and keep me safe.” She tossed back to him. “I think you have plenty of years of experience in guard duty.”


“Just will have to think of a name for you…” She pondered loudly. “Hmm…”

“I’ll pick the name.” Bray argued. “No offense. I don’t trust other species trying to find Batarian names. If I let you, it may be a Vorcha’s.”

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Two Months Later…

“This is it, everyone.” Miranda announced to the others as they circled around Shepard’s bed in the room. Krysta’s cloned body was lying on the bed with a sheet up to her neck. An oxygen mask was over nose and mouth to keep her saturated while two IV’s were in her arms to provide the right nutrients. “I’m going to inject more adrenaline to make her come out of the coma. She will be startled so no sudden movements.”

“It…I mean she looks just like her…” Garrus whispered in awe to Liara beside him. Tears were forming in the Asari’s eyes as she clutched onto Javik’s arm tightly.

“Damn, it will be great to see her again.” Jacob uttered softly.

“Glad Wrex isn’t here…he would be shaking her by now.” Vega joked, causing everyone to laugh softly.

“Isn’t that the truth?” Joker snickered.

The machine that Krysta hooked up to generated a slight noise as Miranda initiated the protocol. A few seconds later, Krysta stirred in her bed, her breathing becoming rapid against the mask. “She-
she’s alive…” Avery gasped softly to herself as she looked on, seeing her old friend coming to.

Bray reached out and clasped Krysta’s reaching left hand, squeezing it gently. “It’s okay. You will be okay.”

Krysta took another hard breath as her almond color eyes looked up at them, still focusing in. She gripped Bray’s hand tightly, her breathing still rapid. “She’s fighting the respirator.” Miranda gritted her teeth as she looked on. “Damnit, Shep. Easy.”

A few moments later, Krysta remained still and slowly looked at all of them with wide eyes. Her hand never leaving out of Bray’s. “Goddess!” Liara exclaimed happily. “Shep…is that you in there?”

“Did it work? Is it her…?” Bray looked over at Miranda for answers.

“Bray……” Krysta rasped through her dry mouth. Her head turned slowly to look at him with a small smile of pain. Hearing his name made the Batarian squeeze her hand tighter as he smiled back at her; lost for words.

“Krysta!” Avery began to cry in joy from the over welcoming reunion. “I can’t believe this!”

“How does it feel to come out of cryo, human?” Javik asked her.

Krysta rested her head on the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. “It feels like hell…where the hell am I?”

“A long story.” Garrus chuckled as he looked on. “I’ll let Liara tell you.”

Krysta groaned and slowly shifted her body some to sit up straighter. “My body is killing me.”

Bray smirked at her. “I never understood what the fuss was about over you.”

THE END: SOLACE

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