Stand Before the Wicked

by Hebisama

Summary

The Reapers have come. Surprise! Once more Shepard needs an excellent team to tackle the fight and *gasp* diplomacy. Sequel to 'Do Not Falter' OR ME3 my way.
Canticle of Transfigurations

Shepard was leaning over the QEC console. She knew she should be contacting admiral Hackett right now but she was tired. So tired. Ashley was critically injured and the Citadel's doctors were unsure on how things would turn out. Anderson, her old mentor and friend, had decided to stay behind to lead the fight back home. The Council was useless as always. Oh, and the reapers had invaded. Don't forget that.

And now she was to lead the charge?

The red-head chuckled tad bitterly – after six months of being in custody and having her every word questioned, she was back and expected to lead them to victory. What a joke.

After another moment of steeling herself, she pressed the button that would contact the admiral. He had been obviously waiting for her call, or she was just of the highest priority.

"Shepard, what have you got?" the man went to business immediately.

"Like expected," Shepard shook her head, "I presented them with something with a lot of unknowns, so they can't commit to anything. Quite frankly, the Council's out."

"You have a plan" Hackett said confidently, knowing the woman would not back down as easily as that.

"I do. I'm trying to get the turian Primarch for a summit meeting with the asari and salarians, bypassing the Council and appealing directly to the top leadership. We need someone who actually can decide things without bullshit politics weighing them down" the vanguard said in a hard voice.

"I like it. Build alliances, get everything and everybody you can" Hackett said in a similar tone, "You'll be the official human representative with Spectre flavoring. They will listen to you. They must, if we are to win this. Leave the prothean device to me, you find me people who can help build it. And we need soldiers, ships, supplies… whatever you can get. Buy us time to figure out the device."

"Tall order" a corner of Shepard's mouth quirked upwards, giving levity to her words.

Hackett gave her a small smile in reply "It is, but I know you can deliver. Also, I won't be leaving you high and dry. The Normandy's yours, no question. While I can't give you a marine attachment I have contacted two civilian contractors that we have been working with lately, so you can start building a team back up."

"Civilians?" the woman frowned.

"Of sorts" Hackett smirked, "The Normandy still needs supplies, some personnel and even repairs – the two I speak of will find you tomorrow in the Docks. In the meantime, get acquainted with your ship again, I'm told there have been some major upgrades. Also I have transferred you a substantial sum of credits from Alliance funding. Get weapons, armor, anything you need. I know I have placed a great burden on you, but you won't be alone. If it is in my power, I'll get it, you just need to ask."

"Thank you. It… it means a lot" Shepard was damn near moved. After all that Cerberus mess, and Ashley throwing it in her face every two seconds, this was a welcome change.

The admiral nodded understandingly. Then he put his hands behind his back, straightening his
Shepard saluted and the QEC flickered out.

She sighed. After a beat of silence she looked up "Hey, EDI?"

"Yes, Shepard?"

"I'm back"

"… welcome back. You were missed"

"That's sweet, EDI, thank you" the soldier grinned, leave it to her AI friend to lift her spirits "How've you been? What about the new crew?"

"Hey!" Joker interrupted on the intercom, "Come up here! I want to catch up too!"

"We were having a girl chat, don't butt in" Shepard exclaimed dramatically.

"I'll let you paint my nails" Joker tempted.

"Oooh! Peach pink would look lovely on you!"

Shepard watched the reporter go, wondering if she made the right decision – Diana Allers seemed different then her 'favorite' Khalisah al-Jilani, but a journalist was a journalist. Still, she had allowed the woman aboard her ship, provided she stayed out of the way. If it didn't work out she always could toss her out.

With that thought she nodded to herself and returned to the report she was reading before she had been ambushed by Allers and her floating camera. Usually she would be reading that in her cabin, but since Hackett was feeling dramatic, she was waiting for her two mysterious additions to the crew.

"Deep thoughts?" a voice startled her.

The commander looked up and gaped before a huge smile made its way to her lips.

"Seriously, Shepard. You should be more aware of your surroundings" Miranda chastised but her eyes were tinkling. Trev nodded solemnly from beside her, already having said her piece.

They didn't have time to do much else because Shepard practically lunged at them, nearly tackling them into a hug "God, I missed you."

Trevelyan smiled "Well, you were in prison, so I think that's a given."

Shepard punched the templar lightly on her shoulder and took a step back to look at her two friends. They hadn't changed much in the half year – Miranda was still in her white getup, only this one bore no sigil. Where once the Cerberus logo was proudly displayed, was nothing. The only thing that could be remarked upon was that the former operative looked lighter, even with the reaper invasion going on. And that now she apparently wore her hair in a ponytail.

Trev though had completely changed apparel. It was logical though, her style was most distinctive, not a smart thing if you're trying to avoid detection. Be it Cerberus or anyone else that might want to have a chat. The templar mark was nowhere to be seen, instead Trev wore her family's sigil – a stylized running horse.
"You're back to Lady Trevelyan, now?" Shepard nodded towards the horse and smirked.

The blonde lost her smile and her countenance became grim "Indeed, since I can't be a Ser anymore."

"What?" Shepard frowned and turned serious as well, "Why?"

"I lost my powers" Trev gave a small strained smile, "They have been weakening for a while, I'm actually amazed you didn't notice – during our final push against the Collectors it was noticeable."

"I just thought you were tired"

"Oh I was, but that wasn't it. I knew it would happen eventually – there was something that was needed to maintain them, a potion, but I didn't want Cerberus to get their hands on it so I never asked for it to be reproduced. If it would be even possible"

Miranda bit her lip and nodded "There was trace amount of an unknown element in Trev's blood after she arrived here, but it left over time. As far as I know, Cerberus wasn't able to reproduce it."

"I hope it holds true" the noble sighed.

"I'm sorry about your powers" Shepard said.

"Being a templar meant a lot to me, but I don't need my powers to define me. I got over it" Trev shrugged with a nonchalance that fooled nobody. Miranda turned to the blonde and arched and eyebrow but said nothing.

"Well, templar or not, I'm glad you're going to fight beside me again" the commander smiled.

"Wouldn't miss it" Trev smirked.

"What did you do for Hackett anyway?" Shepard remembered to ask.

Miranda smirked "I contacted him with information about Cerberus almost as soon as we left the Normandy. He was reluctant to believe me at first, but my intel was good. I continued to do so over the time you were away."

Trev nodded "We figured that if the Alliance was cracking down on Cerberus, it would have less time and resources to chase after us."

"Smart" the vanguard commented. Then she frowned "I met TIM on Mars, he's going to be a problem."

"I have ways into Cerberus communications" the former operative nodded, "I think the Illusive Man is indoctrinated. His actions don't make sense otherwise. And he definitely went into the Collector base – he has the remains of the human reaper."

"Some of it survived?" Shepard whistled, "Do you think that did the deed?"

"I don't know. He has many reaper artifacts now. He wants to control them" Miranda shook her head.

"The artefacts?"

"The Reapers"
"The Reapers? Is he insane?" the red-head gaped.

"Quite possibly" Trev shrugged.

"Isn't that just dandy" Shepard pursed her lips. Then she sighed "Well, no use discussing that now. You have your things?"

"Being delivered. Miranda has… quite a lot of stuff" the former templar shrugged.

The woman in question narrowed her eyes "Spying on a secretive organization requires a lot of 'stuff' if you don't want to get pinged or fed false information."

"So you can really reliably spy on Cerberus?" Shepard perked up.

"Not everything" Miranda shook her head, "But just enough to know if they're planning an operation. Unfortunately anything truly big would be heavily encrypted and carefully hidden. I can get it roughly at the same time a regular trooper involved in the mission might. All the juicy information I already gave to the admiral and I'm not likely to get much again. It still helps though."

"That it does" the soldier nodded, "So you are still monitoring them?"

"Yes, but I can do it on the Normandy too"

"Well, Liara has her broker stuff up so you might want to consult with EDI about power consumption. Or processing power. I don't know, I'm hardly an expert" Shepard shrugged.

Miranda smirked "I know. You are a biotic rhino, not a tech expert."

The red-head gasped dramatically "I'm offended. I can fix most of the problems my terminal or omnitool might have."

"Yes, by powering it off and on again"

"See, solution!"

Miranda chuckled and shook her head fondly "You're worse than Trev and she's from another dimension."  

"Finally know how to turn on the flashlight on your omnitool?" Shepard winked at the noble.

"Indeed" Trevelyan grinned, "I mastered my omnitool and some of its very useful combat applications."

Seeing a manic twinkle in the blonde's eyes, Shepard turned to Miranda who sighed long-sufferingly "She likes to freeze things."

"It's amazing!"

"Yes, dear"

Shepard chuckled. Then she smirked wickedly "Speaking of dear, I can put you in Port Cargo with your computers. Should I add two bunks or just one?"

Miranda rolled her eyes but replied "One should suffice."

"I'm happy for you" the commander smiled sincerely, "I will want the details of that later for sure, as
well as what you have been up to this last six months, but we have to go. Check if your things have arrived because otherwise we are set. We are going to Palaven."

"I heard they got hit, same as Earth" the former Cerberus bit her lip.

"Any news from Garrus?" Trev asked.

"None"

"And you said you have Liara on board?"

"Yes, she did stuff for Hackett too" Shepard nodded as they walked towards the ship, "Thanks to her we have a plan against the reapers. Sort of. Maybe. We'll see. I'll tell you all later. Also the ship's been retrofitted to Alliance specs and we have some upgrades along with new crew, obviously. But all that can wait. Right now I need you armed and ready to go."

The two civilians looked at each other and nodded "We're ready."
The Normandy had to cloak right after exiting the relay. The situation in the Apien Crest was untenable and provided for a horrifying picture. The newest ground team was deployed right away, their urgency more than warranted.

While Trev, Miranda, Vega and Liara were looking out of the window of the shuttle with great unease, Shepard was sitting down, looking at the helmet in her hands. She was once more wearing an N7 armor, after a six-month hiatus. She actually had to buy an armor set she liked at the Citadel and had the Alliance quartermaster to paint it since he didn't have a true N7 one in store. Vega in turn was making due with regular issue armor, his own new set was in the works – his eyes practically lit up when the commander said the Alliance would spring for it. Hackett had been really generous budget-wise.

Shepard offered to pay for equipment for both Trev and Miranda but they waved her off, happy with their own gear. The former Cerberus second in command traded her white get-up she sometimes wore even in the field for sensible armor, going for medium-light this time having learnt from their encounters with husks. Trev in comparison had bulkier and much heavier armor in dark green. The pale yellow accents it had were playing up the Lady Trevelyan angle which Shepard immediately grasped and with a smirk she introduced the blonde to Vega as such. The hulk of a man just arched his eyebrows. Those were threatening to leave his forehead when Shepard introduced Miranda as Lady Trevelyan's consort. Seeing the brunette roll her eyes but not protesting while Trev was grinning smugly, he also pouted - he had been definitely checking out the former XO.

"They are getting decimated" Vega commented bitterly, breaking the solemn silence of the shuttle.

"Strongest military in the Galaxy and the Reapers are having no trouble" Miranda nodded.

Liara looked at the still silent commander "Was it like this on Earth?"

Vega ground his teeth and punched the metal wall beside him. Shepard looked up from her helmet at the sound "Yes."

The asari bit her lip and looked down at her hands. The shuttle fell silent once more. Shepard stood abruptly and put her helmet on. Just in time as the pilot, Cortez, announced "We're close, but the LZ is swarmed."

"Husks" Trev sighed as she looked out.

Miranda almost smirked "We have practice with that."

"All too much" Shepard remarked grimly and took her shotgun from its resting place in the small of
"Fucking zombies" Vega sneered and did the same.

The Spectre didn't even wait for long-range cleanup and charged right down as Cortez hovered over the bare ground of Menae.

"Hell yeah!" Vega grinned and jumped after her, softening his landing with a roll.

Miranda sighed "Morons." She looked to the side at Trev who was taking out the husks with her assault rifle and a pout. She sighed "You want to follow them?"

Trev looked at the brunette, eyes wide with hope. She nodded eagerly.

"Go ahead"

"Thanks. I love you!" the noble smiled, traded her rifle for her sword and jumped down, activating her shield.

"Morons, I'm surrounded by morons" Miranda declared.

Cortez chuckled from the pilot seat "They're not so bad."

"That's debatable" the sentinel smiled softly and jumped down as well.

Menae was a desolate moon – grey dry ground and nothing in sight but a few metal barricades and bunkers. And Reaper troops, a great many of them. The husks were an old favorite, but there were also some new models that vaguely resembled turians. The 'dragon teeth' or, as Joker had put it 'the huskifier', must've worked overtime.

"Damn Trev!" Shepard called, "Miranda was right, you really like cryo."

The former templar shattered the group of frozen husks with a mighty swing of her shield "It's perfect for husks!"

"No denying that!" Vega nodded, "Slows the suckers right down and bam! One bullet and they're shards."

"Works on unarmored thugs as well" Miranda remarked with a faint veil of disgust.

"Reminds me of home" Trev shrugged.

"Some home" Vega commented.

"Magical" Shepard winked at the former templar, deducing the Winter's Grasp spell.

"Ugh" Miranda rolled her eyes in a Cassandra-like fashion.

The team tore through the horde, aided by some of the turian sentries in their sniper nests and barricades. Finally they arrived to the camp they had marked as Command. They were let in without any trouble since they had sent word ahead, despite the spotty reception, and... well, let's be frank, they were alive, armed and obviously willing to help out as punctuated by the trail of dead reaper troops left in their wake. Right now the turians would let in anybody if it meant another pair of hands.

"Your commander?" Shepard asked the guard that let them in, his sharp eyes scanning behind them
for any left-over enemies.

"Over there" the soldier pointed deeper into the camp.

Shepard nodded in thanks and left in the appropriate direction. Her team followed her, looking around the camp – the turians seemed disheartened but determined to fight to the very end. All in all the mood seemed as grey as the moon they were on.

The turian general spotted them first and waved them to him, snapping orders at the two soldiers that stood at attention in front of him. They saluted and left, making room for the humans and the lone asari.

"Spectre Shepard" the man greeted with a respectful nod, "I'm general Corinthus, I'm in charge of this camp. Heard you were coming but didn't believe it."

"I'm here representing the Alliance, not the Council, so perhaps commander would be more fitting" the red-head said with a small grimace.

Corinthus seemed to grasp what was meant and sighed "So the Council won't help us."

"I'm afraid not. But we will help ourselves" Shepard said in a hard voice, "For that I need to speak with your Primarch."

"That is going to be problematic, Primarch Fedorian died a few hours ago. His shuttle was shot down as it tried to leave the moon."

"I'm sorry, I heard he was a good man"

"And a friend. He would've been an outstanding diplomat"

"So what now?" the commander frowned.

Liara hummed "Since the rules of the Hierarchy are set, we should be able to know his successor."

Corinthus nodded "Normally it would be easy to say, but with the things as are right now… Palaven Command should know, we send all our casualties reports as soon as they come to us, but right now our comm tower is down. It got overrun by reaper troops."

"We could take it back" Vega eagerly volunteered, getting a glare from the turian for speaking out of turn.

Shepard nodded "Send us the location, I know your people are spread thin. We will take care of it."

Corinthus gave them a grateful smile "I will contact you as soon as I get the information you need. Restoring communications with Palaven would be a boon for us."

The red-head gave him a sharp nod ad unsheathed her shotgun again "Move out."

"Aye-aye" Vega grinned widely. Liara and the rest of the women didn't seem charmed at all by the thinly veiled bloodthirstiness.

The path to the comm tower was relatively clean at first – no doubt turian troops had tried to retake it more than once – but soon the Normandy group felt just why they failed. Still, as the squad didn't aspire to sweep the entire area and hold it, merely reach the tower and repair it for at least the time it would take to get the information about the succession in the Hierarchy, they had more success.
Husks were the norm on Menae – impossibly fast, disposable troops that counted on overwhelming the enemy rather than employ any discernible strategy. Key was to keep them at a distance without wasting too much ammunition, something that Shepard had to remind James.

"I'm a soldier, Shepard, I shoot" Vega murmured disgruntledly but shifted his focus to Trev's frozen targets so only the shortest of bursts of his rifle would be enough.

"That's the comm tower" Miranda announced after a particularly speedy wave of husks.

Liara nodded "We need to clear the area first."

"They'll never stop coming," Trev countered, "Better send one to do the repairs while we hold."

The former Cerberus operative seemed to agree and immediately approached the control panel "It's fried. I'll need to fix it from up there."

"Go for it" Shepard nodded, "We'll cover you."

Miranda sheathed her pistol and climbed the ladder. Once in front of the damage she hummed "Might take a little while."

"Lawson, you always boasted on being a genius, do not make us wait too long" Shepard said teasingly, reverting for a moment into her teasing and carefree self. The one before the Reapers came and ruined everybody's day.

"I am not adverse to a quickie every now and then, but I prefer to take my time"

Trev facepalmed while the commander erupted in laughter "That's the spirit! We can't have the Reapers dragging us down. Fuck certain doom!"

"And just like that apocalypse averted" Vega said dryly.

"This is the Shepard's Suicide Squad Banter™, you'll get the hang of it newbie" the red-head smirked and turned away from the bulky soldier to concentrate on the coming husks.

"It does actually help with the despair" Trev stage-whispered.

Liara shrouded herself in a blue fire, ready to fight "You get used to it."

Vega was supremely skeptical "Hey, husks! At least something makes sense."

His female companions paused their fights against the space-zombies to cast a dubious glance at him. Shepard arched an eyebrow "You're weird."

"I am wei… never mind. Let's just kill the freaks" James sighed in resignation.

The ladies shrugged and proceeded to do just that.

"Done" Miranda announced form up high. She turned to look down at her squad and whistled appreciatively at the pile of dead husks all around the tower.

"Was it as good for you as it was for me?" Shepard couldn't resist.

"Now what?" Vega interrupted as he kicked one of the coming husks in its chest and put a round into its skull.
"Now we wait for Corithus to contact us" the red-head shrugged and detonated Liara's singularity into a magnificent explosion that left a good sized crater filled with husk remains.

"We hold the line, huh?" the asari winked at Shepard, referencing captain Kirrhe on Virmire.

The red-head chuckled "Damn straight!"

Trev rolled her eyes "Garrus had too much fun with that already."

"More than with his calibrations?" Miranda arched an eyebrow as she joined the aforementioned 'line'.

"Blasphemy!" Shepard gasped theatrically, "Calibrations are practically holy!"

"I see you didn't have the time to read though the Chant of Light I sent you during your confinement" the former templar sighed with equal drama.

"Nope! I was bored but not that bored"

"Charming" Trev said dryly.

Vega arched his eyebrows "I thought you couldn't be in communication with anyone during the lock-down. You were monitored real tight. In case of Cerberus, you know."

"Eh" Shepard waved him off while practically obliterating one of the coming turian-husks. *Huh, we really need a better name for them.* "Between EDI and Miranda, we managed. Although Alliance Intelligence might have gotten the idea I'm particularly fond battle reenactment of ancient human wars performed by that famous turian group. We used their chat room."

The bulky soldier laughed "Those turians like run around in Yankees uniforms and speak with an accent?"

He didn't get a prompt answer because the next wave proved to be rather challenging.

"*Commander, this is Corinthus, do you read?*" came the deep turian voice form the comm.

"Yes, we got a name?" Shepard asked.

"*Yes, come back to command. I'll try to hail him in the meantime*"

"Roger that"

The Normandy ground team didn't need any further encouragement and started moving back to the barricade. They were met approximately in the middle by a patrol of turian soldiers that were sent to try to manage the area around the tower, now that it was operational once again.

Fortunately for everybody involved they were still small enough so they didn't attract the attention of the squid-like Reaper ship that used its beam to ravage the moon's defenders not so far away.

General Corinthus greeted them with a thoughtful expression "The new Primarch is Adrien Victus. He's right here on Menae, we're trying to ping him but so far no luck."

"Victus?" Shepard prompted, seeing the conflicted emotion on the turian's face.

"A damn good man, excellent strategist, but *unconventional for a turian*" came a familiar voice from beside the command structure.
The general snapped at attention "Vakarian, sir!"

"At ease general" Garrus nodded and refocused on his friends, "Shepard, I am ever so glad to see you. And of course the lovely, Liara, Lawson, and Trev."

"Wouldn't miss it" the red-headed vanguard smirked, "And we have an addition to our little marry band of resistance – Lieutenant James Vega. He was my warden during my incarceration and his orders were never rescinded so he follows me around."

"I'll have you know I'm prime bodyguard material" Vega winked and thumped his chest.

"Nice to meet you Vega" Garrus nodded at the soldier.

"You too"

"So, Victus" Trev asked with curiosity.

Garrus smirked "Fought with him this morning before our squads got separated. Hell of a general. He's got what it takes to lead us against the Reapers."

"Good" Shepard nodded resolutely.

"You said you were with him this morning? It might be better to go to him in person rather than talk on the radio" Miranda proposed, "Considering what we're here to ask."

Vega sneered while Shepard nodded "Was thinking that too."

Garrus turned to the general who was hunched again over the holographic representation of Menae terrain "Do we have a location of the Primarch?"

"Can't get a lock. There is a lot of interference. But I have given this a priority" Corinthus frowned.

"Brutes at the main barricade!" came a near-panicked shout form nearby, causing everybody who wasn't given a posting to rush in that direction.

James looked hopefully at his commander. Trev nodded "We could help while the general searches for the Primarch."

"He was in that direction anyway last I knew" Garrus shrugged and took his trusty sniper rifle off his back.

Miranda pinched the bridge of her nose "We really make a fine diplomatic group."

Shepard smirked "I think it would make for good relations if we helped clean up a little."

Despite their discussion/bickering the team was already in motion, climbing up the main barricade to reinforce the position. Turns out it was direly needed – several heavily armored Reaper troops were intermixed with regular husks, making it had to concentrate on one or the other, thus leaving the defenders vulnerable to the one they weren't focused on. Both units needed different approaches and enough men to pull it off.

While the biotics concentrated mainly on the brutes, the rest mopped up the regulars. The turians also had several turrets mounted up, helping to cull the horde.

"Shepard, we've got trouble up here" Joker patched himself though to their radios without any preamble.
"The Reapers found you?" Shepard immediately jumped to the obvious conclusion.

"Couldn't be" Miranda murmured with a frown.

"No, stealth is holding and the IFF helps a lot" the pilot reassured, "But something's wrong with EDI. Or the ship. Either way she isn't responding, the lights are flickering, the comms keep turning on and off. All the systems are going haywire!"

"Shit" Shepard summed it up, "What does Adams say?"

"He knows nothing"

"I could take a look" Miranda offered, "It could be some Cerberus booby-trap that got triggered."

"What did you install there" Vega frowned, having been told about the brunette's previous affiliation. The sentinel arched an eyebrow "Me personally nothing. But knowing Cerberus systems might come in handy with dealing with this."

Shepard nodded "Cortez? Can you do a pick-up?"

"I can't land in the middle of the camp, Commander"

"We'll coordinate" Miranda replied and started climbing back into camp.

"Be careful" the red-head called after her, "If something happened Trev would skin me and make a new pair of moccasins."

"Don't be disgusting" both Trev and Miranda replied in unison.

Garrus arched and eyebrow, looking funny over the scope of his rifle "You and Lawson, huh?"

"Indeed" the noble nodded.

"About time"

"Yes, the end of the world. Best timing ever" Shepard winked, trying hard not to look at Liara as she said it. Trev noticed and resolved to ask her friend about that relationship. As far as she knew, that was over and had been for a while.

Several new brutes joined the fight, keeping the defenders quite busy. Now, without Miranda looking in, Trev decided to replay her adventures with the yagh and jumped on one of the armored opponents, stabbing him repeatedly in the neck until he collapsed. She got several approving hums from the turians, while Shepard mouthed "I'm so going to tell."

That didn't stop Trevelyan from repeating the feat, relying on ranged support to keep the regular husk busy, or better yet, dead.

Finally, Shepard's and Garrus' omnitools pinged. The Spectre recalled her team "We've got a location!"

The rest of the team jumped down, joining Trev and Shepard on the other side of the barricade and took off in a slight jog. Since it was the barricade that attracted most of the attention their run was pretty smooth. But that gave them time to look around and to see all the destruction the Reapers have wrought. The worst view was of Palaven itself – big splotches of yellow and red signalizing fire and mayhem.
"You got any family down there?" Vega asked Garrus.

"A sister. And my father. Right there, in the middle of that big splotch. That was is our capital city. But they were still alive when I looked last"

Liara looked at the sniper "I'm sure they are alright."

"Yeah"

They ran in silence after that, only once breaking it to warn of a small dart-like aircraft came crashing down near them, sending pieces of metal flying in all directions. Nobody was hurt though.

Several times they encountered turian squads, holding various positions, but most often they just laid there dying, unable to move. Shepard gave out some of their medigel, but only scarcely, when recuperation was guaranteed. But it was heartbreaking to just leave the injured behind even if there wasn't much they could do. Especially since their mission was so vital.

Finally Garrus announced "That's the camp. Victus should be there."

"And we'll be asking him to leave" Vega said bitterly.

"Yes, we are" Shepard nodded, "Because if we don't, all the races will die off alone in their own corner of the galaxy. Our only hope is to unite. And for that we need a voice. Victus can save far more lives by coming with us and 'play diplomat' than he ever could here."

"I still don't like it"

"Your reluctance has been noted"

"And not appreciated" Trev spoke up, "I'm sure you had to make hard calls too. I'm sure you didn't feel the need having them thrown in your face every time something similar came up."

Vega just grunted but looked down at his boots in silence.

"Thanks" Shepard murmured. The noble shrugged.

This camp was in much worse shape than the once they came from. It has been visibly breached several times and most of the defenders looked ready to drop from fatigue. Still, they were fighting on. The Normandy group joined the fight right away. Shepard even managed to score a rocket launcher from somewhere which she immediately used to clear the space of several brutes. Once the ammo gauge was empty, she handed the gun to a nearby turian with a busted leg.

"Reinstituting you policy of always carrying a heavy with you?" Garrus asked with a grateful chuckle.

Shepard winked "Mister Vega, make a note. I want a big honking gun."

"Esteban's the quartermaster, he'll find you the finest there is"

"Esteban?" Trev arched an eyebrow.

"Cortez"

"I thought his name was Steve"

"It's a nickname, caballera" Vega shrugged.
Trev was lost now "Caballera?"

"Marauders!" another distressed shout interrupted their conversation, causing them to move further to the right to help out.

"Garrus, say when you spot Victus" Shepard ordered.

"Of course"

Slowly they made way into further into the camp, battling Reaper troops along the way. When the turians finally managed to repel the invaders, Garrus sighed in relief "I see him. Over there, black armor, red highlights. Speaking with a sergeant."

"I'll coordinate with Cortez for our pick-up" Trev volunteered as they made way to the turian in question.

Liara nodded "I'll help patch up some of the soldiers before the next wave hits."

Shepard sighed "Leaving me alone to persuade a general to leave his men. Thanks a lot."

"You have Garrus. And charming mister Vega" the noble smiled feebly.

"Awesome" was the dry reply.

"And I'm not charming?" Garrus pouted.

Trev smiled much more genuinely "No, you're devilishly handsome."

"It's the scar" the turian said sagely to James who seemed taken aback by the abrupt shift in mood.

"You people are loco"

Chapter End Notes

Ad 'Caballera' – I know no Spanish whatsoever, only Italian, but I know one of my favorite shows when I was little was called Caballeros del Zodiaco in the Spanish version. So… I was shooting for female knight. If any Spanish-speaking audience would correct me, or propose an alternative, I'd welcome it very much. But I won't be using it much. Vega will stick with his Lola and Esteban in my version.
"So Victus wants the krogan" Shepard sat beside the Ostwick noble in Port Observation, aka the rec room.

"Uh-uh"

"Only then he will commit for a more comprehensive offensive"

"Uh-uh"

"The asari are taking their sweet time answering about the summit"

"Uh-uh"

"Trev, are you even listening?"

"Uh-uh"

"Stop staring at EDI" Shepard reproached.

"Uh-u, ouch!" Trev turned to the red-head and rubbed her arm.

"Much better" Shepard smirked.

"But that's an artificial body!" the noble gestured at the body formerly occupied by an AI called Eva Coré, "It's one of the most fascinating things I have ever seen. Well, I have seen possession before, but that is hardly comparable. And EDI says she can come with us on mission with this all the while still being in the ship!"

"I know"

"How can you not be excited about this?" Trev shook her head.

"I agree with Lady Trevelyan," Traynor who just got back from the bar joined the conversation, "It's amazing."

"One of my best friends has a new body. Not a phase I thought I would ever say" the dirty-blond piled on.

"And what a body it is" Traynor muttered appreciatively.

"Thank you Specialist Traynor" EDI replied.

"You weren't supposed to hear" Sam blushed, getting chuckles from the other two women.

"I hear everything"

"Well, that's ominous" the comms specialist muttered again, this time teasingly.

Shepard smirked widely "Really? Watch this. Hey EDI, is there a god?"

"There is now" the AI chose to answer for the ship and not her shiny new platform.

…
"Spooky" Traynor gulped.

"That was a joke" EDI clarified.

"I see Trev teaching you humor was not a wasted effort" Miranda said as she strode in, pad in hand, "Shepard, I think I got something off Cerberus traffic."

The commander turned serious in an instant "What is it?"

"They want to raid a scientific station in the Decoris system" Miranda passed the pad, "They are after several Reaper artifacts."

"Why does the station have them in the first place, those things are dangerous" Trev frowned.

The brunette shrugged "They were studying indoctrination."

"Decoris is not far, we should be there in a jump" Shepard hummed, "We can't have such research in the Illusive Prick's hands. It's enough he's huskifying his troops."

"My thoughts exactly" Miranda nodded.

"EDI, set the course please"

"Yes, commander" the EDI-bot replied swiftly.

"That's handy" Shepard commented.

Trev arched an eyebrow "It's literally the same as before."

"Oh, right"

Traynor chuckled but then turned to Miranda "Cerberus, is that why you are mooching off my QEC?"

"Yes, thank you" the white-clad woman smiled cheekily.

"At least this one says thank you" Samantha sighed dramatically, "I haven't even seen Dr. T'Soni and she's taking up a lot of processing power."

"Yes, I don't think she left her room apart from getting coffee since we have returned from Menae" Shepard hummed.

"Have you talked to her?" Trev asked nonchalantly.

Miranda nudged her slightly "Don't be such a gossip."

"What gossip, where?" Traynor's eyes practically lit up.

The red-head actually chuckled "Being the awesome commander that I am, I will be benign to my subjects and tell you."

"I bow to my awesome commander, awed by her generosity" Sam replied swiftly and in the same tone.

Shepard's eyes sparkled and turned to Miranda and Trev "See, this is how it's done! You should bow too."
"I like her" Miranda chuckled and stood up, "But while you all bow I'll go contact Hackett to tell we will take care of Sanctum."

"Really working for that pardon, huh?" the Spectre smirked.

"I already have it, in writing and everything" the brunette flicked her hair and left.

"How long must I bow before I get the gossip?" Traynor returned to the important things.

Shepard's eyes narrowed playfully "I dunno, you're still sitting. I see no bowing whatsoever."

"I'm bowing internally"

"Ah, that's alright then"

"So?"

The red-head nodded gracefully "So, a long time ago, in a galaxy far far away, I used to date Liara."

"Oh, that's it?" Sam pouted.

"That isn't enough?" Shepard pouted right back, "It is a tale of woe and heartbreak, of coming from the dead and bitter rivalry, of conquest and suicide missions."

"And I'm back to interested"

Trevelyan laughed loudly and got up "And on that note I leave you as well, I already heard it you see. I'll get ready for the mission, just let EDI call me. Oh and Shep, don't exaggerate too much."

"Not too much then"

"But I am a heroic knight, that is alright to say"

"Crowds tremble before the might of your sword and fair maidens fall into your arms" Shepard nodded solemnly.

"And that's right" Trev gave an elaborate courtly bow.

Shepard turned to Traynor "So, where were we."

The Andrastian left the room, biting down a smile. Oooh, this was good. She couldn't wait to speak to Miranda about this development.

"Trev?" the AI bypassed her body again, wanting to speak in private.

"Yes, EDI?"

"I am unsure, but according to my observations, I would venture the Shepard and specialist Traynor were flirting. Is that correct?"

"Oh dear Maker yes!" Trev grinned widely, "You noticed too? What do you think of Traynor by the way, you have known her far longer than we."

"Very competent. I have subtly practiced humor on her. I am quite sure she knew about me being an AI and not the VI I was portraying myself to be, and she hasn't told anybody. She seems to find my voice attractive"
"She told you that?" the former templar chuckled.

"Yes. Although she wasn't sure about my AI/VI status then"

"I like her, she seems to fit our team"

"I have also noted you don't seem overly partial to lieutenant Vega"

"It's just those muscles. Ugh" Trev shivered, "How can anyone find that attractive I'll never know. And no, I don't want to hear any statistics or comparative research."

"Acknowledged"

"I ruined your joke, didn't I?"

"Yes"

"Does your new body pout?"

"I shall conduct testing to that effect"

"Oh boy. Just make sure Joker doesn't crash the ship"

Shepard stared at the QEC console which just a moment ago held the image of Councilor Tevos. Before she practically hung up on her. Part of her, a very, very small part of her, wanted to give her kudos for repaying the favor from three years ago where she hung up on the Council when enough was enough. The bigger part of her was pissed though. It was the end of the world, the apocalypse, ragnarok, or whatever, and people still couldn't see reason.

She sighed and let Traynor know she wanted Hackett on the line. He replied immediately, standing straight with his hands behind his back as usual. "Complications?" he asked.

Shepard rubbed her eyes "The asari won't be joining us on the summit. On the other hand Wrex RSVPd."

Hackett stroked his beard "Having the krogan on board would be a boon for us. So would this alliance with the turians. The salarians seem uncertain."

"Yes, they won't like the krogan on the summit"

"And the asari can't be reasoned with?"

"They're out for now"

"They're going to regret that" the admiral sighed, "Let's hope we all don't end up regretting that."

"How goes the construction of the device?"

"We call it the Crucible now and its going fairly well. People are motivated"

"Yeah" Shepard chuckled without much humor.

"Also, good work with Cerberus on Sanctum. Listening to miss Lawson's information is paying off"

"Yes, I'm really glad she's on our side"
"So am I" Hackett nodded, "Also I see your gamble with the reporter, Diana Allers, is paying off as well. Battlespace is actually helping."

"Oh right, I almost forgot about her" the red-head said sheepishly, "I cautioned about not bothering the crew when they're busy. Seems she took it as avoiding me."

The aged admiral laughed "I would too. Everybody saw you were itching to slug al-Jilani during your first Spectre interview."

"Not my finest hour, I admit"

Hackett chuckled once more and turned serious "I have more calls on the other line, all of them urgent. But that is everything these days. Contact me once more before the summit. Good luck commander."

Shepard saluted and the image flickered out. She let the salute drop and sighed "Krogan, turians and salarians. This is going to be fun."

"Your tone indicates sarcasm" EDI spoke up.

"Spot on"

The Spectre walked out of the QEC alcove and passed though the war room with a nod to Victus who looked up from his work to give it back. She passed than damnable security checkpoint and made a bee-line for Traynor "Specialist."

Sam didn't turn, just extended her index finger to make the commander wait a moment as she finished whatever she was doing. A moment later she nodded in satisfaction and faced her commanding officer "Shepard?"

"The asari are out. Please coordinate with Victus, Wrex and whoever they are sending from the Salarian Union for the summit. Try to get them here in under a week" the red-head sighed.

"Yes, commander" Traynor nodded, "Also I have the retro-fits progress report almost ready, Adams will want to talk to you about his section sometime soon. You have gotten new messages, some of them coded. The mess EDI left behind by getting her body has been cleaned up. Furthermore there are some crewmembers that would be willing to sell their souls for some updates from Earth if you would have them, similarly Allers wants to speak with you when convenient. Also I have found a licensed software that could help up with some issues in communication speed, if you would write off on that. Oh and the lighting issue down in deck four can be fixed only in dock, so I have that marked as 'in progress'."

Shepard started for a moment and then hummed, impressed "You've been busy." 

"We are a skeleton crew" the specialist shrugged, "Not being able to sleep helps."

"Don't overwork yourself"

"Of course" Traynor dismissed it like any good workaholic, "There is one more issue though."

"Yes?" Shepard arched an eyebrow at the unsure tone.

"Just moments ago I have intercepted something while scanning Alliance channels. Grissom Academy is requesting help, the invasion front will hit them soon. Logical, yes? Yes, so a turian evac transport responded to the distress call, also logical. BUT. It sounded off, the response time was
impossible. So I asked EDI to perform an analysis and it's fake. EDI thinks it's Cerberus, she said this signal is similar to the one that lured you to a Collector ship?"

"Long story" the red-head waved the question of for the moment, "So Grissom Academy is still in danger."

"That would be my guess"

"Good catch" Shepard smiled, "Damn good catch."

"It's a guess. And educated guess, but still a guess. And…” Traynor fidgeted.

"I said good catch. We'll check it out. Don't worry, even if it's nothing, which I doubt, it's better to be safe than sorry."

Any counter the specialist might've had was interrupted by Miranda who came off the elevator in great hurry "Shepard, I think I have another one."

"Cerberus operation?"

"Yes, at…"

"…at Grissom Academy by any chance?" Shepard smirked smugly.

The brunette frowned "How do you know?"

Shepard made a grandiose gesture that encompassed the entirety of Samantha Traynor, who fidgeted uncomfortably. Miranda gave her a respectful nod "Indeed at Grissom Academy. They want the research but mainly the students."

"Recruiting?"

"Forcedly"

"Set the course. How far are we?"

Traynor hummed "A few jumps and a bit. But our stealth drive will most assuredly be needed."

"Cerberus built this drive, it won't help us. But I agree we need to go" Miranda countered.

"We really get no rest" Shepard sighed.

"It is war" the pale brunette shrugged.

"Yeah, and everybody chose this time to go nuts"

"Liara's not coming again?" Garrus asked as he rechecked his sniper rifle.

"She'll be down in a minute," Shepard shook her head, "Cerberus and kids isn't a good combination."

"For a horror story maybe"

"Why did you work for them then?" Vega asked, genuinely curious, not a trace of judgment – he learned the hard way.
The commander squinted at him but as he passed the judgment test, she shrugged "It was the only viable option at the time. Besides, Chakwas got it right – we practically *robbed* Cerberus. We took their best ship, their best people, oh which reminds me we have to pick up Ken and Gabby. Also we took a shitload of money and of course my resurrected self."

"I still can't believe you were really dead. Madre de Dios, that's something"

"Wasn't sunshine and rainbows" Shepard hummed.

"I don't know, she glows occasionally" Trev chimed in. Garrus nodded excitedly.

"Yes, you should really stop by the infirmary" Miranda added, "Stress makes the scars a lot more visible than they should be."

"Yes. Stress" Shepard rolled her eyes, "I supposed the words jail and invasion don't mean anything to you."

"Never been in jail actually" Trev shrugged.

"I had to clean one up sometimes at C-Sec" Garrus hummed.

"Not me" Vega joined in on the teasing.

Everybody turned to Miranda who shrugged "I had gotten myself arrested once to reach an informant."

"And shank him?" the commander asked eagerly.

"Yes"

"Oh. Didn't expect that" Shepard rubbed the back of her head awkwardly.

Miranda winked, making everybody unsure if she'd been kidding or not. Trev was just about to ask when Liara came out of the elevator, completing the team. Well, EDI wasn't there yet, but they hadn't really gotten used to that yet. Her trial run at Sanctum went very well so Shepard allowed her on the ground team roster when thing weren't too busy on the ship that would need he complete attention. Considering her power, those things were few.

Cortez called them from his pilot seat "We're ready. Just waiting for Joker's signal."

The team loaded onto the Kodiak shuttle, shortly joined by the AI. Cortez was keeping the engines ready so when Joker distracted the Cerberus cruiser that was guarding the operation at Grissom Academy, they were able to go almost immediately.

EDI had managed to get through to Kahlee Sanders, the supervisor/headmistress, without Cerberus getting wind of it, so they were able to dock to one of the auxiliary entrances without alerting the enemy.

Staying low key worked exactly one minute because right out of the airlock they were spotted by a small Cerberus group that was trying to gain entry to one of the security offices.

The squad didn't hesitate even for a moment and took the five men out in a heartbeat. Once the white-clad men were down, they paused, listening for any possible alarms. Nothing happened.

Miranda took one of the transponders off one of the troopers and tried to patch herself through into their communications. In the meantime Shepard approached the doors that Cerberus was trying to
"Sanders? It's Shepard."

One of the cameras whirled and then the door opened to reveal a blonde woman in Alliance blues holding a shotgun in a very threatening manner.

"Hey" Shepard greeted breezily, like as if she met her in a park during a leisurely stroll, not during an invasion.

The woman chuckled "Hey back. First Lieutenant Kahlee Sanders, I'm the Alliance representative here and in charge of the engineering program."

"Commander Shepard and minions"

"Jee, thanks" Vega murmured.

Sanders chuckled but sobered up almost immediately "Most of the student had been evacuated quite a while ago, only the older students who volunteered stayed behind. It's mostly the experimental biotic artillery squad and a few of the most promising engineering students."

"How many people are we talking about?" Trev asked.

"Twenty or so" the woman replied, "The biotics are together in Orion Hall, their instructor is with them but Cerberus is focusing on them hard, I don't know how much longer they can hold out. The engineers are spread out."

"That's not good" Shepard hummed, "We'll go to the biotics and see if we someone on the way. You stay here, we'll send you who we find. Load them on the shuttle and be ready to take off."

"Can the shuttle hold twenty people?" Trev asked.

"There will be less" Miranda said in a gentle voice, "Cerberus has some of the engineers in custody already."

Sanders cursed. Shepard sighed "You got into communications?"

"Yes. Some of the engineers are giving them real trouble with some experimental shield, but they are on the other side if Orion Hall"

The commander nodded "Let's go then. First the biotics, then we'll see what the situation is."

"Please hurry" Sanders said with a touch of resignation – the engineers were her students.

"We will. Move out!"

It seemed they managed to get in undetected – the small group they killed evidently didn't have enough time to call for reinforcements or alert to the presence of intruders. It also meant they managed to get the drop on the first squad of Cerberus troopers as they were dragging a loudly screaming stunt in red uniform. Or well, at least in theory. But to be fair, nobody could really expect the dividing glass dividers to be bulletproof.

For one second everything paused, like in the old cartoons, and then the student resumed his screaming while the troopers brought up their weapons. Liara shattered the glass with a truly mighty biotic attack so the rest of the Normandy ground team could reach their foes.

Only after the weapon's fire died down, the student stopped screaming, only sobbing quietly now. Shepard motioned to Trev with her shotgun. The noble rolled her eyes and approached the teenager
curled up in the fetal position "We're Alliance. We're here to help. You are safe now."

Sobbing continued, but it was touch quieter.

"You need to be brave and strong now and reach Kahlee Sanders in one of the security offices down the hall we came in. We have a shuttle waiting that will take you far away. You'll be safe but you need to go now"

"Please don't leave me!" the engineering student uncurled and grabbed Trev's arm.

"We need to help others. Cerberus is here to take the best of the best here, that is why tried to take you, right? That's why I know you can do it" the blonde smiled under her sentry interface, "There are no more Cerberus behind us, but you need to go now. Sanders needs you."

"Professor Sanders?"

"Yes, just down that hall"

"Okay" the teenager said in a faint voice and sniffled. Seeing as the rest of his saviors were already taking position at the nearest doors he stood up and wiped his face. One more glance at Trevelyan and he took off running, fortunately in the right direction.

"Nice" Vega nodded at the Marcher.

"A touch cliché" said Miranda but softened it with a genuine smile.

"Glad I didn't have to do that" Shepard grinned and made a motion to continue on. The team burst into the second room, scanning for enemies.

Trev sighed "I know, that's why you threw me under the bus."

"You are getting rather good with modern idioms" the red-head hummed, "And hey, you are good at that. You know my speeches suck."

"The one you gave us as we left the Normandy before you turned yourself in was pretty good" Miranda remarked.

"And Grunt did like your 'don't die', that's a classic" Garrus chimed in.

Vega who was firing his assault rifle in short bursts at the Cerberus troopers that took cover behind the potted plants on the hall shook his head "You guys sure talk a lot."

"But we kill a lot too, we're just that good" Garrus shrugged.

"Field banter is something I have noted to occur with regularity during all Shepard's missions" EDI agreed, "Performance doesn't seem to be impaired."

Liara hummed "But it was a bit less during the Saren hunt."

"Eh, I still gave a shit then" Shepard shrugged, "New XO position, then new Spectre position. And the ship was all regulation."

"It's regulation now too" the asari countered a bit sadly, having realized she missed out a little bit.

"But is end-of-the-world war regulation" the vanguard corrected, "And I'm pretty much the boss now, Hackett declared it and everything."
"Flashbang!" Trev warned.

"Damn I hate those" Garrus muttered as the squad took cover.

They proceeded rather quickly, considering, but it seemed the Cerberus troops were scattered, trying to find out all the holed up students rather than trying to kill Shepard's team.

Cerberus was also slowed down by the strict 'capture only' order they got on the students. Normally they would never encounter a huddle of troopers around a small biotic dome one lone student was holding, merely waiting for him to exhaust himself and letting him get captured easily.

That of course didn't happen because the Normandiers came galloping to the rescue. The young biotic gulped at all the blood, but since it all came from the ones that tried to kidnap him he seemed to get over it fast.

"Thank you" the young adult said, trying to keep the treble from overtaking his entire body, "You're Alliance, right?"

"Yes" Trev nodded, resigning herself on 'being the most personable person in the team so deal with it'. "You seem ready to drop. Do you have a nutrient bar or something on you?" When the student shook his head the noble gave him one of her chocolate pick-me-up. As he opened it gratefully, she looked him in the eye "Finish this and play dead until you rest up enough. When you feel up to it go to the auxiliary docks, you know where that is?"

He shook his head again, starting to tear up. EDI spoke up "Office 436 in corridor B4."

"B4, yeah, I know where that is!" the biotic exclaimed happily but almost collapsed onto the floor as the adrenalin that was keeping him up drained from his system.

"Good. Remember, play dead, and then go to B4" Trev reiterated, "But don't fall asleep. You hear?"

"I won't" the student promised, "I'll only rest a minute, I don't want to stay any longer than I have to."

"Sanders will meet you in near the end of B4"

"Lieutenant Sanders is alive?" the youngster lightened up.

"Yes, we'll send more students your way when we reach them"

"My sister!" the biotic said abruptly, "We separated, I don't know where she is!"

"We'll look for her" Trev assured, "But we must go now."

"Just find Seanne!"

Once they were out of hearing range Miranda hummed "It's no wonder Cerberus is after them, that student was really powerful."

"For a human" Liara corrected without malice but got eye-rolls from Shepard and Miranda, the resident human biotics.

The discussion was interrupted by a voice blaring out of the loudspeakers, obviously broadcasting all over the space station. The message the man on spear was trying to instill to the remaining students was simple – you have no chance, you're all alone, stop resisting. Cerberus is awesome, Alliance stinks.
Garrus sighed as he sniped one of the speakers "He reminds me of Jedore."

"That chick we killed on Korlus?" Shepard frowned in remembrance, "Yeah, she got on my nerves too."

Despite the message, the squad managed to find or rescue two more students and send them to Sanders.

"According to the school schematics, Orion hall is right ahead" EDI announced.

"I hear explosions, so I would say it is a safe bet" the commander nodded, "Let's be ready people, the main course is here."

The breached in, immediately taking stock of the situation. The sea of Cerberus white-clad troops was expected. The two Atlas mechs were more or less expected. What was not expected was Jack, Subject Zero, actually dressed! and leading the student's charge.

"Shepard?" Jack exclaimed, obviously taken aback as well, "Guys?"

Since Shepard was too busy with a biotic charge, Miranda answered for her "Well, if it isn't the psychotic biotic. Around kids, no less."

"Fu-ss you cheerleader!"

Garrus blinked in confusion "Did you just refrain from swearing?"

"Shut it bird-man" Jack shouted back and then turned to her students, "Up on the second floor and into cover. Let them take the heat, we'll be support. No back-talk!" The group of students mumbled protests but when one of the Atlas mechs turned to them with its big guns, they scrambled up the stairs and into the lone office that provided cover.

Miranda had noticed the mech turning as well and shot him with an overload, joined shortly by Trev who did the same. The shield was down after a few shots, something that Liara and Shepard took full advantage of – the asari ate up the armor with a warp while Shepard just charged in, detonating it beautifully. If she timed the landing better, it would've been textbook-worthy.

The students up high cheered. Garrus grinned "We should do more fights before an audience. I like this. I feel validated."

"Having ear of the Primarch and being head of the turian Reaper Taskforce isn't enough?" Trev hummed.

"Nah. Besides, the taskforce was a joke before the Reapers actually arrived. A token gesture to shut me up. But applause, applause is genuine"

"You've clearly never been in Orlais" Trev chuckled.

"Where's that?" Vega asked, allowing himself to talk now that he was quickly changing magazines.

"Practically a parallel dimension, don't worry about it" Shepard chimed in, breathing hard due to her biotic expenditure.

"Huh?" the soldier said eloquently but didn't linger on it, opting to chug a frag grenade into a nicely placed cluster of Cerberus troopers that was trying to protect an engineer planting a portable turret.

It didn't take too long – with the Normandy group tanking and the biotic support from on high, the
Cerberus soldiers were dispatched rather swiftly. When the fighting died down, as did the last trooper, Shepard sprung up from her cover and looked over her teammates. Seeing no injuries she grinned "Damn, we're good."

"Sanctum was actually worse, I nearly stepped off the ledge of the landing pad there" Garrus nodded.

"Because you had your eyes glued to the scope and wasn't paying enough attention" Miranda reproached him.

"Sound you're slipping bird-man" Jack said loudly as she approached them, then she realized she inadvertently made a bad pun and groaned.

The team was merciful and let it go. Trev instead asked "You're the biotic instructor Lieutenant Sanders was talking about."

"You? Teaching?" Miranda's eyebrows shot up.

"Yeah, got a problem with that?" the convict crossed her arms defiantly.

"Of course not, I always thought it would be just grand to have a hardly dressed, almost-bald, tattooed former prisoner to teach impressionable kids" Miranda smiled sweetly.

"She has a swear-jar" Garrus defended.

"The kids seem to like her" Shepard nodded towards the row of approximately eight students, glowering at Miranda for her comments.

Jack turned and smiled fondly at her biotic class before scolding them about their fighting performance while praising others.

Miranda leaned towards Trev's ear "Don't tell her, but I'm actually impressed."

"I'm too. It seems she found her niche. Teaching, who would've thought" the former templar hummed.

"Not me, that's for sure"

"Commander" Cortez's voice came on the radio, "The cruiser is coming back, I can't stay here much longer. Two minutes tops."

Shepard grimaced and spared a glance at the students in front of Jack. She sighed "Load up the kids and Sanders and take off. We'll find another way off the station."

"There are several Cerberus shuttles on the other side of the station, where my engineering kids could be" Sanders interrupted, "I could disable security and look up a path if you find me a terminal of some sort."

"EDI?"

"On it, commander"

"I will stay behind, I know how to get there undetected. I wager I'll be there before you" the lieutenant spoke up again.

"Alright. Cortez, take the students and take off. We'll keep in touch"
"Aye-aye"

"Now where were we" Shepard turned to her team only to get slapped by Jack.

"I told you, didn't I?" the tattooed woman glowered, "I told you not to trust Cerberus."

"And I never did, what's the deal?" Shepard brought her hand to her cheek with a pout.

Jack pointed at the dead Cerberus troopers and then at her students. She out her hands on her hips and glared.

"What?" the Spectre pouted even more dramatically.

Trev cleared her throat "In all fairness Shepard told TIM to sod off as soon as he wasn't convenient anymore."

"Yeah" Shepard nodded enthusiastically, "And Miranda got out too, she was just sick of being treated like a mushroom."

"A mushroom?" both Miranda and Jack frowned in incomprehension.

"Kept in the dark and fed shit"

Trev bit her lip, trying very hard not to laugh at her lover who narrowed her eyes at the commander, silently promising retribution for the stupid comment. Garrus and Jack had no such compunction and nearly fell apart laughing. Vega was just shaking his head with a small smile – they were growing on him.

"Alright then" Jack returned to the task at hand, "What's the plan?"

"We take the shuttles Cerberus troops flew in and take off" Shepard shrugged.

"Liking it but those shuttles are behind the Atrium" the teacher hummed, "That's a kill zone and they have lots of people here. We could split up – me and the kids will be support again, you mop up."

"Ah, the glamour of the job" Garrus sighed fondly.

"Don't worry, I'll applaud you if you get hit in the face by a rocket again" Jack smirked.

"Splendid"

Shepard chuckled and tapped her ear to contact Sanders "How are we on the security?"

"The doors leading to the Atrium have been open about two minutes already" came the dry reply.

"Oops, just catching up, ya know"

"Indeed"

"Alright! Time to go" Shepard clapped her hands.

They split up according to Jack's plan, the students going high while the Normandy group took the main road. The hall leading to the atrium was clear, which only meant more troops on the other end.

Cerberus didn't disappoint and came at them in full force. The garden before the atrium was obviously a rally point – it was nice and spacious with a lot of cover and nice sniper perches. The
squad was pinned down as soon as they stetted in. If it wasn't for their biotic support they wouldn't even gained a foothold.

"Is it me or are they getting better?" Garrus asked as he searched for the enemy snipers to take down.

"There are just more of them and had time to prepare" Trev shook her head.

"Still"

"Doesn't it feel weird to be shooting your former comrades?" Vega asked Miranda.

"Not my comrades"

"HOLD ON!" Trev shouted loudly in complete outrage, "They copied me! They got shields! That's MY thing!"

"The Illusive Man did always appreciate a good concept and didn't shy from stealing them" Miranda hummed.

"But that's my…"

"I heard you dear"

"Buurn" Shepard smirked, "But hey, you should be flattered."

"And it doesn't seem they have any Smite powers" Garrus chimed in, silencing the group immediately. That would be really bad. But it did truly seem as that power was lost to everybody at the moment.

"Thank the Maker" Trev whispered, she was really uncomfortable about that. She had taken great care about not even mentioning lyrium while on the mission against Collectors, but she knew this world had technologies that seemed almost magical. She was really glad Cerberus didn't seem to have figured out how to make templars.

"Yeah, cause those turrets are irritating enough" Shepard complained. The turret in question got hit by a singularity, uprooting it along its engineer. "Thanks Liara. Let's press on."

More turrets sprouted up, along with an Atlas mech to top it off. They concentrated on the canopy of the Atlas, destabilize it enough so that Garrus could take out the pilot. As he took aim and waited for the right moment, Trev was keeping her shield in front of him.

"Gotcha!" the turian grinned as the giant mech was taken out of the fight with a single shot.

"I like this" Liara smiled.

"I prefer the version with the big explosion in the end" Vega countered.

"While it takes out more foes around it with its explosion, this is a much faster option which also leaved the mech for our possible use" EDI chimed in.

Shepard's eyes lit up "Awesome, I have never ridden one of those."

"No, Shepard" Miranda said sharply, "With no canopy and shield, they would take you out as easily as we sniped out the pilot."

"Hem, hem, I took out the pilot"
"What a good boy"

"You losers are gonna proceed or what?" Jack shouted at them from up high.

They noted the turrets that were preventing them from pressing into the next section of the garden had been biotically scrapped, courtesy of their back-up.

"Handy" Shepard whispered, making sure Jack didn't hear.

Despite their path being rather clear, a new wave of troopers dropped to the fist level, taking the high ground. Fortunately Jack and her students were one more level up so they weren't in danger and could actually help out.

Finally all that remained living in the garden were the plants and Shepard's team. Jack and her minions had already disappeared into the next room. The ground team followed.

Once in the short hallway that led into the Atrium proper they all had to arch their eyebrows – there was another small group of troopers around three Grissom students that his behind a brilliant ocre shield, and all of them didn't seem to be paying attention or note that there had been a huge fire fight, complete with explosions, going on a few meters from them.

With an amused look at each other, the Normandy team dispatched the four troopers with a hail of bullets.

"David?" Shepard exclaimed in surprise as she got a good look at the engineering students.

"The square root of 906.01 is 30.01. Hello commander Shepard"

"You look much better" Trev smiled, relief evident in her tone – what the man had been through was truly horrific. Miranda who was standing beside the noble touched her elbow lightly, almost inaudibly sighing in relief as well. The Archer situation had been what made her first think about the possibility that TIM and Cerberus wasn't all it's cracked up to be.

"I am" David archer smiled and then turned to his fellow students "Please lower the shield."

"You know them?" his friend frowned, torn between suspicion and hopefulness.

"Yes. They saved me from Cerberus and sent me here. She made it quiet"

Shepard was enormously relieved by that fact. While the other two Grissom students didn't really understand what 'made it quiet' mean, they lowered the shield.

"Are you going to save us?" David asked in that guileless voice of his.

"Yes" the red-head nodded resolutely, "We'll be taking the Cerberus shuttles, the biotic students should be there as well. You three stay close but out of the way. When the cost is clear, reach the biotics and listen to their instructor. You did a great job so far, it's almost over, just leave it to us."

"Okay" the lone female engineer nodded, the tension in her body relaxing a little bit.

"Stay here, come in only when the fire dies down"

"Thank you" the other student nodded as well and put a hand on David's shoulder, "Come on, let's get out of the way."

"I have been counting" David didn't move.
"Anything in particular?" Shepard asked.

"The number of days you lengthened my life"

"Oh"

David joined his two friends, leaving a speechless Shepard behind. She watched him talk softly with them and sniffed. "Ok, last stop – Atrium" Shepard announced, her voice a little bit teary.

"Good" Miranda nodded, not commenting on the commander's shift in mood – she had been affected as well, "I think we rescued all that we could. Cerberus doesn't report anymore struggling students."

"How many did they already take?" Trev frowned.

"Some"

"We still need to save these ones, we can't afford to look around anymore" Garrus reasoned.

"Especially since reinforcements are coming" EDI announced.

"ETA?" the commander asked.

"We should be long gone if we maintain our average time of advancement"

"Let's hurry up then"

They made their way to the Atrium, the very last room before the long-awaited shuttles that Sanders radioed were ready to go. The students were at the end of the room, just above the exit, holding a biotic dome, taking the troopers, preventing them from getting to the landing pad.

Shepard and her team immediately engaged the enemy troops, diverting their attention to them rather than the weakening biotics.

Cerberus came at them in waves – obviously having been recalled for other parts of the station, but it wasn't any worse than the garden fight had been. This one was pretty standard with no party having time to bunker down. The only thing of note was that once of the enemy engineers forgot about his turret and instead took aim with his pistol, getting a lucky shot at Vega. The huge man shook it off with ease, the bullet getting caught by his armor and not penetrating, but it made Garrus snicker at his expense.

Enemies thinned which allowed Jack to usher her charges into the landing zone where Sanders was waiting, and load them into the spacious shuttle.

The ground team wasn't that far behind. Finally getting enough reprieve from the still coming enemies, the decided it was time to scram and calmly retreated onto the aircraft.

As bullets rapped on the closed doors and Sanders piloted the shuttle out of the station, after getting the all-clear form Joker of course, Shepard sheathed her gun and stretched languidly.

"So Jack, how have you been?"
Canticle of Transfigurations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Grissom students and their two surviving instructors got a brief tour of the ship and were parked into starboard observation, where the bar-less rec room was situated. Sanders got clearance for the QEC and was coordinating with Hackett and then tried to get admiral Anderson on the line. It appeared her and Anderson had history.

When Sanders was on the phone, the students, Jack no doubt being the instigator, sneaked across the hall and into the bar-equipped rec room and treated themselves to a glass. Jack monitored the intake, being her new self and all. They were ready to crash anyway.

Jack watched her students fondly, something Shepard noted as soon as she came through the doors. It looked good on the younger woman.

"Thanks for the save" Jack said to the red-head when she approached close enough.

Shepard smirked "Don't thank me, Miranda is the one to monitor Cerberus chatter."

"I owe cheerleader?" Jack was horrified.

"And EDI and my comms specialist, it was a team effort" the vanguard amended. She would have credited mainly Traynor, but that wouldn't have been as fun.

"I can live with that" Jack calmed.

"She's one of the good guys, you know that"

"Still don't like her. The fact she stopped drinking the cool-aid won't change that"

"She and Trev are now together" Shepard added with a wink, "Or so they say, haven't seen proof yet."

"Voyeurism, really, Shep?" the teacher laughed, "Saint T can do better, but good for her. Maybe if cheerleader gets laid on a regular basis she will be less irritating."

"I won't comment on that" Shepard grinned, "EDI would tell."

"I am not a gossip Shepard" EDI said from up high.

"Not anymore" the commander corrected.

"Yo EDI, didn't have the time to tell you but your new body is smoking hot" Jack smirked.

"Thank you" the AI replied, "I think you'll appreciate to know that the body had been modeled after Miranda Lawson."

Shepard snorted in laughter while Jack looked mildly horrified. Once the commander stopped choking she grinned "Excellent point EDI. Most helpful. I'll be sure to pass it along - it should finally settle the issue of the Miranda/Jack tension."

"You do that and I gut you" Jack growled at the teasing, even if it was mostly for show. Grissom
Academy and her kids really mellowed her out.

"I won't, Trev is the jealous sort" the red-head shrugged.

"Forget them, how are you? How was jail?"

"Eh" Shepard shrugged again, "I wasn't frozen, so not that bad."

"That ship was foul" Jack sneered, remembering her cryo cell.

"It was trying more than anything - I knew the Reapers were coming but hardly anyone listened. And who did had their hands tied anyway. Frustrating. Frustrating and sad. Sure, in retrospective we would've gained only six months of preparation, but it would be something!" the Spectre gritted her teeth.

"I did say you were stupid for turning yourself in. You gained nothing. If you ran like cheerleader for example, you could've gotten resources and people from the Terminus"

"I gained my credibility back. Well, now that the Reapers have actually arrived. Official representative of Earth"

"Good for ya, but it seems absurd to me"

"Yeah" Shepard grimaced, "I went from traitor lunatic with dangerous delusions to hero again. It's... a bit disgusting to be honest. But I can use it. I have to. I can hardly just stay in a corner and tell passerby 'I told you so'."

"Oh, I would be tempted" Jack smirked.

"Oh, I am"

"But I guess it's not really the time" Jack proved to be uncharacteristically mature, "And by the way, thank for keeping my kids out of the front lines."

"It was the right thing to do"

"Girl scout" Jack grinned.

"This girl scout busted your ass out of jail"

"There is a badge for that?"

"Sure, it goes right between the badges for tying knots and selling cookies"

"Speaking of girl scouts" Jack muttered and stopped leaning against the wall to face an angry Sanders who found her charges at the bar.

"Good luck with that" Shepard whistled at the impressive shade of red Sanders was sporting and prepared to flee, "We can catch up at dinner, Garrus and the rest will want to catch up too."

"Yeah, yeah" the convict said dismissively and went to face Sanders.

Trev finished fixing herself some tea and took her mug along with Miranda's coffee to the table her lover was sitting at, reading some report or other. She placed the beverages on the table "Here you
"Thank you Lyn" the brunette said absently, focusing on the pad in her hand.

Trev looked surreptitiously around to check if anyone was close enough to hear the abbreviation of her first name. Then she gently kissed the white clad shoulder and put her chin there to look at the pad as well "Cerberus again?"

"For Allers" Miranda nodded, "Might stem recruitment a bit. People are getting desperate and Cerberus promises solutions."

"A false hope at best"

"True, but that doesn't really matter, does it"

The noble merely nodded and snuggled closer to the brunette. Miranda shot her a mildly reproachful look as several crewmen made their way into the mess hall. Trev sighed and let her arms drop, shifting to a token distance.

"Do you have any more news on that front? It was Sanctum and then right after Grissom"

"Not right now. Or, none that I know of"

"Good" Trev nodded, "Besides the obvious, it would be best in nothing happened with the most prolific human terrorist organization right around the peace summit if we are to host it."

"True but I doubt the Illusive Man will be so considerate"

"Oho?" Jack exclaimed dramatically, coming into the mess hall with Garrus, "Do my ears deceive me or did you say a bad thing about your Idolus Maximus."

Miranda rolled her eyes "If your hearing is failing, you could go check in with doctor Chakwas."

"Nah, I'm good" the tattooed woman plopped herself opposite the couple.

Garrus did the same "Ah, this feels like old times."

"Yes, from the deep past of six months ago" the brunette said dryly.

"If we are nitpicking I'd say there's plenty change" the turian countered.

Jack grimaced "Such as giant squids hell-bent on taking over the world?"

"Do you watch cartoons with your students? That sounds like a line from one" Miranda smirked.

"You do remind me of Shaggy"

"The talking dog would be an improvement to you"

Garrus sighed fondly and smirked in Trev's direction "See, old times."

"You mean me not having the faintest idea what is being talked about?" the Free Marcher arched an eyebrow.

"I have no idea either" the scarred turian shrugged.

"Whatever" Jack waved them off, "So Shep said you two are dyking it up together, how did that
happen?"

Miranda shrugged and returned her attention to her reading so Trev answered for them "Well, once I ascertained Miranda truly did leave Cerberus I asked for permission to court her."

"Courting" the tattooed woman snorted, "Why did I even ask."

"It was sweet" the former Cerberus second in command hummed absently, her eyes not leaving the pad.

"Well, it obviously did work" Garrus nodded.

"Still, had you pegged for super straight cheerleader"

"Obviously not"

Jack smirked "So princess, how's she in bed? Cold fish? Bossy? Whips and chains?"

Trev got a vacant stare at the last one, opening her mouth slightly. Garrus snickered "Seems that just got added to their list for the future." Miranda looked up, arched both eyebrows and then returned to her report with a smirk.

Jack was laughing so hard she got tears in her eyes and was slamming her palm on the table. Trevelyan got beet red and coughed "I... have to go. Yes, to do a thing. Somewhere else. Bye!"

As the blonde fled, Jack finally caught her breath "So the pious knight is kinky as hell, precious."

"Why did Trev's head look like it was going to explode?" Shepard asked as she came into the mess hall.

Garrus smirked "She might be a wee embarrassed."

"Wee?" the commander arched an eyebrow, "Did you buy some add-on to your translator? And embarrassed about what?"

Jack grinned "Saint T creams her pants at the thought of being cheerleader's little sub."

"Huh. That's pretty hot" Shepard hummed.

"You have no idea" Miranda smirked with much satisfaction, continuing her reading ignoring the many subsequent questions. After all, a lady doesn't share.

/

The Normandy arrived at the Citadel late evening - ship's time that is, of course the station had a different time zone and perpetual day. Still, the Alliance crew was officially on beta shift, almost gama, but it was still bustling with activity - nobody really got too much sleep while a war was going on. The strain was most prominent in Samantha Traynor.

"Busy night?" Shepard asked from right behind the specialist, hoping to catch her unaware.

She had succeeded but didn't get the desired reaction as Sam merely turned and blinked sluggishly "Yes. My apologies but there still isn't a fixed date for the summit. The salarian Dalatrass is making waves."

"Anything I should know?" the red-head frowned.
"She's just stalling for some reason, but it can be managed on my level, I know you are very busy"

"You're doing great work Traynor" Shepard smiled encouragingly, the honey-skinned brunette really was frighteningly efficient and managed to be pleasant and funny company, when she was about to keel over from the lack of sleep.

"Thank you. But I am glad lieutenant Sanders managed to negotiate with the Citadel for lodging for her students and other matters concerning them, on her own. That is always a long and tedious process"

"Yes, the Citadel is a true maze of bureaucracy. But I feel I will miss it, I have to meet with Aria T'Loak"

Traynor's eyes got big "The pirate queen of Omega?"

Shepard chuckled "The very same. I hope to convince her to join with the war effort. We need every able body, every resource. Aria has plenty, but it won't be simple I wager. And only almost-legal I fear."

"I see the numbers coming," the brunette looked down at her terminal with sadness but also determination, "We are losing millions. It almost seems like an online game rather than reality. Barely believable."

"Take a walk on the Presidium, you'd never would have guessed a galaxy-wide war is going on" Shepard said with faint disgust.

"At least it is a nice reprieve, one place where you could try if only for a moment to forget our world will never be the same"

"I understand that, but it still makes me feel uncomfortable. Last time I was on the Citadel I brought a friend to the hospital, barely hanging on, and yet the biggest issue of the pair I rode with in the transport was that her shoes did not match her dress of the day and the reason for it. Her friend had graciously decided to forgive her faux pas. Millions dead, planets burning, and they were concerned about accessories"

"How is lieutenant commander Williams?" Sam decided to change the subject slightly, getting angry while nothing could be done was pointless and it served to merely rile one up.

"Much better" Shepard smiled tightly, "I plan on visiting her during this visit. Barring emergency and the Summit, we stay on the Citadel for the time being, I have several errands to run. Hopefully we will be leaving this station with more promised troops and resources than we have currently."

"Traynor, Shepard" Trev greeted them coming off the elevator.

"Hey"

"Lady Trevelyan" Samantha inclined her head.

The blonde noble was amused "I told you to call me Trev."

"I like how you were presented to me. How many people can say they worked alongside a lady and knight" Traynor smirked.

Trev sighed. Shepard nudged her gently "It is rather cool."
"I noticed you thinking so - you introduced me as Lady Trevelyan to *everybody* on this ship"

"So jealous" the red-head whispered conspiratorially.

"Common folk always is" Trev said with the snootiest tone she could manage. Then hid a grimace just how close her voice sounded like her mother's when she did so.

"Ooooh! Please apply water to the burned area" Sam laughed.

"You win this one" Shepard acquiesced, "As prize you will be accompanying me to Purgatory. We're going to see Aria about some men and eezo."

"You already asked me to do so"

"But now it is a prize"

"Huzzah"

"Mind your manners, Lady Trevelyan" Shepard said haughtily.

"My sincerest apologies my lady" Trev bowed in a grand manner, "Will you do me the honor of basking in your presence as we you embark on the valiant quest of talking of the queen of Terminus."

"Why do I get the feeling that if you said that in Orlais you would get slapped?"

"I wouldn't have. But most likely a bard would've been sent to my chambers at night, and not for the fun reason"

"I can imagine. Ready to go then?"

"Just us?"

Shepard shrugged "The rest is glued to their screens, managing data, and Vega is accompanying Jack and the Grissom delegation."

"Right. Oh and you said to remind you that you need to pick up Ken and Gabby from Alliance custody"

"Official Spectre pardon or not and I still have to sign more papers and in person" the commander sighed.

"Well, you *are* taking responsibility for them. It does make sense" Trevelyan shrugged.

"Joy"

"We get two great engineers out of that deal"

"True. Onward my lady?"

The blonde rolled her eyes fondly and took the professed arm "Indeed. Have a good night specialist."

"Try to get some sleep" Shepard frowned in concern.

"Try not to get murdered by Aria" Traynor shot back, already typing away on her terminal.
Trev hummed "She does have a good point."

"Aria's a pal" Shepard smiled brilliantly.

"Maker preserve us"

/  

"So tomorrow we deal with all three main mercenary companies" Sheppard rubbed her brow, leaning on the elevator's wall, "Fun."

"They will be needed" Trev said absently, deep in her thoughts, "This war will need everybody, regardless of affiliation or honor."

"Yeah" the red-head sighed, "But there is no way I'm releasing Sideris from custody - she's bonkers!"

"Bonkers?"


"I got the gist, thank you" Trevelyan rolled her eyes.

"….She's lost it. Went postal. No longer in possession of one's faculties. A few cards short of a deck…”

The noble banged the back of her head on the elevator wall and closed her eyes "Maybe you and Sideris will get along, it seems you have much in common."

"Well, that's just mean"

"Welcome to Lever Four, Huerta Memorial Hospital" a synthetic voice announced with a bing and the elevator door opened.

"Thank the Maker" Trev sighed in relief and took off.

"So mean"

"Speaking of mean, I'll find Thane and you can go see lieutenant commander Williams" the blonde said with a small grimace.

"You don't like her huh?" Shepard commented.

Trev frowned "No."

"Well, I'll meet you in a bit. Send me the location when you find Thane, I wouldn't want to miss him"

"Of course. Hey, you wouldn't happen to know if Thane likes flowers"

Shepard tapped her chin "No idea, but I should buy Williams something."

"Ugh"

"She's an old friend, get over it"

"Oh yeah, EDI mentioned how swimmingly you got along on the way to Mars"
"…point taken. Still getting flowers or something though"

"Yellow Carnation?"

"Is that a flower?" Shepard scrunched her brow, "Wait, is it one of that language of flowers things?"

"Might be"

"What does it mean?"

"Disappointment and rejection"

"Now who's being mean"

"She hurt you"

"Aww"

/

Shepard was super tired after three days of running around the Citadel, but when Hackett calls, you answer.

"Commander" the admiral greeted with a nod, "I read your report – your time at the Citadel was most fruitful. But I have to ask – Eclipse? Blood Pack?"

"We need manpower" Shepard shrugged uneasily.

"True enough" Hackett acquiesced.

"I'm still in the middle of securing the Blue Suns. You know, to complete the set"

"You're one hell of a collector Shepard" the man commented wryly.

"You know me, sir" Shepard winked.

"I do, that's why I put you in charge" Hackett chuckled, "I'm sure the hanar are especially glad about that right now."

"Most of the credit goes to Spectre Jondum Bau, he found the plot. Nearly died foiling it too"

"I read. Thank you for keeping me appraised, this would normally never cross my desk"

"Yes, classified and all" the red-head nodded, "But I found it crucial to notify you about the indoctrination of such a high official. There might be more. We need to be really careful."

"That is grave indeed, but we can't let it stop us in working together" Hackett stroke his well-kept beard.

"True" Shepard sighed. Before she could say more, her omnitool lit up twice in a short moment. She sighed again, this time more loudly "Great, more mail."

"Trouble?"

"God I hope not" the woman shook her head, "Just very very busy. I get every report on what's going on here since I don't have an XO. Specialist Traynor does a wonderful job of it unofficially, but she has her own job to do. If it wasn't for EDI taking up some of her responsibilities, she
would've collapsed from exhaustion ages ago. But I still worry about her. Especially now with the summit imminent."

"Traynor, huh? I only know the R&R sings her praises" Hackett hummed, "But if you feel the need, just fill the XO post and delegate."

"It's not that easy; we're a skeleton crew as you well know" Shepard waved him off, "I have only six officers aboard, one of which is flying the ship, the second is my quartermaster and plenty else, then Chakwas, the fourth is Traynor, Adams has his hands full with engineering, and I wouldn't trust Vega with it."

"Why not Vega? I read his sheet, good field commander"

"Emphasis on field. And he's too reckless, too angry. And… well, I just wouldn't feel comfortable having him as second in command. I actually miss Miranda at this point"

"Why not her then?"

Shepard stared slack jawed at the aged soldier "You'd allow that? She's not even Alliance. Former Cerberus and all?"

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. And she proved herself" Hackett actually shrugged.

"I guess. But she's too busy with monitoring her former employer, so I'll pass on that"

"What about Ser Trevelyan? She should be free to help"

"Trev?" the red-head exclaimed in disbelief and then coughed, "I mean, there are some things about her you don't know. She's not quite versed in… eh."

"I believe miss Lawson saw that she was caught up on all the major things. Being from Thedas should not hinder being an XO if she gets briefed on Alliance protocol" Hackett shrugged again, but this time there was underlining amusement.

"THEY TOLD YOU THAT?"

"Only a month or so ago. I told you I trust Lawson, it seems to go both ways. And I was rather insistent on getting the information on Trevelyan as she could not be found in any database" the man smirked smugly.

"Oh. Well, eh, good for you"

Hackett chuckled "So what about her? Trevelyan shouldn't be busy, you trust her and she has officer and command experience."

"Just like that? She's not Alliance" Shepard frowned.

"I could make her Staff Lieutenant" the admiral proposed airily.

…

"Shepard?"

The woman in question finally closed her mouth "You're serious? Isn't it… cheating?"

"Listen Shepard, I too am quite busy. You want an XO or not?"
"Yes"

"Can Trevelyan do it?"

"Yes" the red-head trailed out more hesitantly.

"So what's the problem?" Hackett arched an eyebrow, "And if you say protocol, I'm hanging up."

"Alright" Shepard shuffled her feet like a scolded child.

"Have her pick up Alliance blues on the Citadel, I'll take care of her paperwork"

"Wait!" the vanguard exclaimed, "I have to ask her first! She might not want to join. I mean being a templar was pretty important to her. She was really poetic about it. And you should see how she revered the uniform."

"Ask her and message me. With the Reapers ravaging Earth it is no time to be thinking about 'cheating'. Besides, from what I heard, the Alliance would be lucky to have her. I really need to go now. Good luck, commander"

Shepard barely had the time to salute her commanding officer and he was gone off the QEC. She leaned on the railing and rubbed her brow "This is wild. EDI?"

"Yes, commander?"

"Can you give me a location on Trev?"

"Trev is in on deck three, in front of the memorial wall"

"Thanks" Shepard nodded. Then she stood straight again with a sigh "Hey EDI, did you eavesdrop?"

"Yes. I hear everything on this ship. Not my fault"

"I know, I was merely wondering what do you think"

"About Trev joining the Alliance? Or being Executive Officer?"

"Both"

"Being XO would be nothing new for her" the AI replied, "But I have insufficient data regarding her joining another military organization that isn't the Templar Order."

"You don't know either, huh?"

"My understanding of organics is improving but such an analysis is beyond my current level"

Shepard chuckled "Might never be. God knows some people are dense, organic or not."

"Noted"

"It would be handy to have an XO though. I have enough with blegh, diplomacy. If someone took care of the rest, that would be great. Traynor is already working for three, this would cut her workload significantly"

"I believe there is a higher probability for Trev to accept if you use this argument. She has
mentioned on several occasions she likes specialist Traynor"
"Sneaky, EDI, I like it"

"Thank you"

"Alright, let's ask her. Memorial wall you said?"

"Yes. Logging you out"

"You just said you hear everything so that doesn't make sense"

…

"Alright, have it your way" Shepard rolled her eyes and started walking towards her post and the elevator. As she passed Traynor she noted the dark circles under her eyes and sighed. After a brief greeting she entered the elevator and pressed the button that would get her down a deck. When the doors opened she noted with some surprise that Trev and two of the crewmen were working on the Memorial Wall, adding names. She noticed the plaque Kasumi Goto and hummed with realization.

"Great idea, Trev" the commander said out loud, causing the two crewmen to drop their screwdrivers and snap at attention.

The former templar smiled sadly "We were talking with Miranda and I realized they deserve to be here. To be remembered, even if they're not Alliance. They fell while battling the Reapers and saving the galaxy."

"You're absolutely right" Shepard nodded and observed as the two men exchanged the blank plaques for the names of Jacob Taylor, Zaeed Massani and Kasumi Goto. Even the cook, Rupert Gardener, got remembered.

"Thank you for your help" Trev said to the two crewmen when the job was done. Both smiled, saluted to the both of them and left.

"You know" the Spectre trailed out, "It is quite apropos that you took initiative. How would you feel about getting a new look?"

"New look?" the noble frowned in confusion.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Yes, one line or so was taken from Stargate, episode "Window of Opportunity". One of my favorites :-)
"It... itches" Trev tugged at the collar of her brand new dark blue uniform.

Miranda looked her lover over appraisingly "It suits you though. Very handsome."

"It feels strange… But good" the blonde said in a strained voice, still unsure about her circumstances.

"I'm glad"

"I like being in uniform again. Belonging somewhere. Even in my Inquisition days it was a bit unorthodox – I didn't quit like Cullen did so I was both a templar but also a proud member of the Inquisition"

"You didn't like being only the Lady Trevelyan?" Miranda asked with curiosity while she smoothed further the fabric of the Alliance officer uniform.

Trev shrugged absently, still looking at herself in the window – space was so dark it served well in place of a mirror "I was never supposed to be Lady Trevelyan anyway – if I wasn't a Ser, it would be Sister, at the very least, or the Lady whatever else if I had to marry. I'm ever so glad my family didn't push me in that direction."

The biotic leaned into her lover with a small smirk "Me too. So, ready to face the music?"

"I think so," Trev nodded and straightened her back, "By the way, will they call me Staff Lieutenant or simply Lieutenant? I never thought to ask. I rather like the full thing to be completely honest. And under no circumstances will I ever be Ma'am."

Miranda sniggered "No, that would not suit you at all."

"But sir is a bit too much like Ser" the noble sighed sadly.

"So what, you might not be a Templar anymore but you certainly fit all the knightly criteria" the former operative shrugged. Then she smirked cheekily "My paladin."

"Jack would be making retching sounds right about now" Trev smirked right back.

Miranda rolled her eyes "No, she would make a comment about my icy heart melting or something. Now, since you obviously don't want me to be nice, let's go."

"I like you being nice" the officer pouted.

"Then why bring up Jack instead of kissing me for my encouraging and kind compliment?"

"Because I would want a bit more and then my hair would be a mess? I have a meeting to go to, you know"

"The uniform comes with a cap"

"Which I'm taking off as soon as permitted"
"As permitted" Miranda parroted with a small grimace, "You won't go all protocol on me, right?"

Trev fidgeted "No. But I admit, when I put on a dress uniform I hear and echo of knight-commander Silas yelling. It still gives me the chills. You had wondered why I polished my armor so much as I did during our run against the Collectors – Silas is why. And it was calming. Almost meditative. But Silas was the main reason."

"Maybe some positive reinforcement is in order" the brunette smirked with a mischievous glint in her eye.

Trev's mouth went dry at the look "I wouldn't be adverse to that. Not at all."

"It's a date then. Now, let's go"

Samantha Traynor was at her station, cobbling together information for the Summit which she finally got the final date for – and hadn't that been fun. She sighed as a notification appeared on the right low corner of her screen with a discreet ping. After a quick read, she shook her head and opened yet another file, the one she used to keep track of all her tasks. It was dishearteningly long.

"Specialist"

Traynor nearly jumped, not having been paying attention to her surroundings one bit. She turned to see Lawson and Trevelyan. Now it only needed Shepard to complete the gorgeous trio. It was really unfair – the blonde, the brunette and the red-head, all enticing in their own way. Like Charlie's angels. Gosh, she loved that old thing. Oooh, EDI could be Charlie. Well, Hackett would be Charlie but no matter. Still would be awesome.

"Specialist?" Trev asked again, this time with concern.

"Sorry, spaced out a bit. Had to withdraw my brain from cyberspace" Sam joked awkwardly.

"I see" the noble glanced at Lawson who shrugged disinterestedly.

Then Sam noticed the uniform on the blonde and cocked her head to the side "Laundry day?"

"New job"

"No kidding" the Brit exclaimed and smiled, "Welcome to the fold! We have horribly tasting food, little vacation and cramped sleeping spaces but we get to yell at people and walk around all important and stuff."

Trev laughed "Hackett sold it better. But Shepard seems to agree with your version more."

"And still better than my version" Miranda shrugged, "But I guess I can live with it."

"I asked you. And you even made some very good points in favor" the Marcher huffed and crossed her arms.

"True" the biotic agreed freely, "But that doesn't mean I'm thrilled. But yes, I think it is a good opportunity and I support you."

Trev uncrossed her arms and smiled. She turned to Traynor "Where's Shepard?"

"I have no idea" the specialist shrugged, "She just messaged that everyone who wasn't doing time-
critical work to be here. That she had an announcement. She'll be here soon I supposed. You're the announcement?"

"As Garrus says - no spoilers" Trevelyan smirked.

Sam squinted at Trev's uniform "Well, I think I can guess *Staff Lieutenant*. I didn't know you were Alliance, or that you had higher rank than me. Not that I was ever too hang-up on rank - I got mine pretty much only for clearance purposes."

"It's complicated" the former templar shrugged dismissively, not wanting to advertise the fact she in fact climbed the Alliance ladder in a most unorthodox manner. Sam was a friend, but if she was to be XO, she needed the respect of the regular crew.

"Complicated as in 'I can't figure it out' or complicated as in 'stop being so damn nosy'?"

Miranda chuckled "Both actually."

"You hand out with the 'old crowd' as Joker dubbed it, and we'll fill you in" Trev promised. Then she noticed the elevator door opening to reveal a familiar red-head followed by Chakwas "Hey, Shepard."

The doctor smirked "Lieutenant, I trust with your new position you will be reminding our dearest commander to not postpone her regular check-ups?"

"You scan me all the time! What happened to Serrice Ice Brandy and conversation" the commander in question complained grumpily.

"Shepard," Chakwas said with fond exasperation, "We had *one* check-up. Right now. And it was supposed to be the *entry* one. I say you have already missed two more."

Trevelyan smiled sweetly "Oh, I'm sure I will get the commander to see you more often. I'm not above using force and blackmail."

"I preferred you when you stuck with praying" Shepard huffed but her eyes made sure to signal her friend she was joking.

"I can multitask"

"Good. You'll need that" the Spectre smiled widely and touch evilly.

"Yes, I already said goodbye to my free time" Trev sighed.

Miranda smirked "At least you won't hover over my shoulder when I'm working all the time now. And you said it yourself, you had enough of studying."

"What were you studying?" Traynor asked with interest.

"History and customs" the former templar said breezily.

Shepard snorted in laugher "Well put. You living with a spy is showing."

"You're a spy?" Traynor's eyes got wide in realization as she turned to Miranda, "Oooh, that makes sense."

"Does it?" the brunette arched an eyebrow.
Seeing the specialist stutter Shepard chimed in "Trev's got a type. Her ex was a spy too."

"Spy master" Trevelyan corrected.

"Technically Miranda is a spymaster now too" the red-head hummed pensively.

"I suppose"

"That's all nice and well, but weren't you about to make the announcement?" Chakwas interrupted, "We are all busy people after all."

"Not me" Shepard grinned, "I'm just about to off-load a bunch of my stuff on Trev. You do the same Traynor."

The honey-skinned brunette smiled "I most happily shall."

"Good, those dark circles under your eyes were getting frightening. Might even cause the Reapers to turn tail" Shepard made a motion at Traynor's face.

"You were always a flatterer" Miranda said dryly.

"Hey, I can be charming," the vanguard protested dramatically, "Right, Trev?"

"Most charming, commander" Trev said with her best minion monotone.

Shepard huffed "I'll take it nonetheless. Anyway, Traynor, I put in your file that you held the XO position in the interim on top of your regular duties and that you did a great job."

Traynor blanched "But that might get me promoted! I don't want to!"

The commander was taken aback "I read your file, you were slated for a promotion anyway. With your work in R&D and war-time service, it is practically guaranteed. Especially with the… general decrease of our forces."

"Joy" Sam said dryly.

"Sorry?" Shepard said sheepishly and rubbed the back of her neck.

"Let's just get this over with"

Chakwas sighed loudly "Finally! This is fun, but I was in the middle of something."

Miranda smirked "You know Shepard, she likes drama."

"Hey!"

Trev smirked "Still charming, commander."

"Oh shut up, XO"

/

The krogan, the turians and the salarians pretty much hated each other. Correction, the latter two hated the krogan, and the krogan had enough hate to spread around. Not that the salarians and turians were the best of pals, mind you. Knowing all that, the summit between those three races was guaranteed to be… eh. 'Loud' was a good place to start. 'Adversarial'. 'Organizational nightmare'
worked too. Despite that, the Summit was a formal occasion and the Normandy decked out for that.

Staff Lieutenant Trevelyan quietly whined when yet another report was presented to her, getting the attention of specialist Traynor who smirked and winked at her before returning to her own work. At least this report was positive – the entirety of the shuttle bay was ready for inspection. Which right now basically meant that Vega, Cortez and some crewmen had swept the floors, got most of the loose items out of sight and prettied up the crates of cargo to make them look organized. Not that it was expected the delegation to go to Deck Five, but Trev liked to be thorough in her duties.

So far only Engineering had the all clear. Worst off was the War Room, much to the blonde's chagrin. But it couldn't be helped – it was a brand new feature of the ship and the retrofits weren't as much done as the rest of the ship. It was fully operational and very much in use, but it looked like work in progress, with all the cables around and loose panels. While finishing all the work in the scant hours before the Summit was impossible, cleaning up and hiding the mess was quite reasonable.

"I'm off to the shuttle bay" Trev said to Traynor.

"Inspection?"

"Yes. Should be quick, Cortez doesn't look like the messy type"

"True" the brunette smirked, "But I already hear you were a hard-ass, sooo…"

"I only want the ship to look presentable, is that too much to ask?" Trev challenged.

"No" Traynor's smirk got more pronounced, "But Jefferson complained you gave him a broom with orders to clean up."

"So?"

"He has two doctorates"

"So?" the blonde was decidedly unimpressed, "It's war time, everybody pitches in. He was just standing there looking bored so I gave him a task. A menial one, sure, but needed."

"Oh I agree, but it is a funny story – especially if you know Jefferson"

"I never liked his type" Trev grimaced, "Awed by his own genius and a serial complainer."

"Sums him up nicely" the specialist hummed and returned to her work.

The Free Marcher stepped down from Shepard's usual post over the galaxy map and went towards the elevator. She pressed the button that would bring her to the lowest deck and brought he hand to her neck – she spent quite a bit of time hunched over her omnitool and terminal and it was a bit stiff.

When the elevator opened Trev was quite pleased, even if tad surprised, that the personnel assigned to the shuttle bay was waiting for her, standing at attention. She nodded to them "What do you have for me gentlemen?"

Cortez smiled and took her on a quick tour of the deck. Fortunately everything was in order which meant another item crossed off her list. Which was great, as they were cutting it quite close to her self-imposed deadline.

Moments later after the tour Trevelyan's omnitool lit up again to inform her that the Crew Deck and
Medbay were ready. Not that there was too much to get ready there – most of the still lingering crates were moved to Life Support and out of the way and the rest was already pretty much done since it was where the crew spent its downtime. The only real issue was the bathrooms since nobody was too thrilled about cleaning them but as it was the most used poker night bet, it got done without too much grumbling.

The reports kept coming and just before eleven hundred hours shipside, everything was ready for the Summit. The flaws were hidden, what could sparkle sparkled, the smell of bleach dissipated, personnel that would be in sight was ready in their dress blues. There was even some refreshment ready should the negotiations go for longer than Shepard hoped. Security was at full alert. All in all, the Normandy was ready.

If only that could be said for their commander and chief diplomat.

"I hate this" Shepard whined, still in her tank top while her dress uniform was laid out on her bed.

"It's just a bunch of people" Trev said dismissively.

"I have to be nice" the red-head grimaced, "And diplomatic and shit."

"You can be persuasive"

"Because I usually irritate the hell of people until they do as I say just to get rid of me"

"Whatever works" Trevelyan shrugged, "Now, would you please dress. Wrex is due any minute now."

Shepard smiled "I did miss Wrex. But Wrex as a diplomat? I don't know, plus he will expect me backing him up and you can bet your hide he will ask for something to be done with the genophage."

"I agree" the blonde nodded, "With him. The genophage is an abomination that has been in effect long enough."

"The dalatrass will be thrilled"

"I think she will be pissed no matter what you say or do – after a while she refused to talk to Traynor so she got transferred to me. Dalatrass Linron is…" Trev made a face and gestured vaguely.

"A cunt?" Shepard offered cheerily.

"Crude, but apt"

"But a cunt we need." The commander grimaced as she heard what she said "And that metaphor ran away from me. Did Liara dig up dirt on her?"

"You mean you haven't read the file yet?" Trev was horrified.

"I… skimmed it"

"Shepard…"

"What? It's not like I don't know how it will go. Victus is determined to get krogan legions on Palaven so he will back me and Wrex and Linron will be pissy and tell us to go to hell" the red-head shrugged, "The rest is gravy."
"Important gravy" Trevelyan sighed.

"I have my charm" Shepard smirked, "And Jondum Bau promised me his support, Spectre support, but also mentioned he has several friends in STG that could be persuaded to focus on the larger threat even if the Dalatrass would deny it."

"That's good, but it would be better to get the support of the salarian government as well" the noble said pointedly.

"We'll see how it goes. I haven't heard all the demands yet so this is idle speculation"

"Shepard," Joker's voice was heard on the ship's intercom, "The krogans are incoming. Will be here in a few."

"Shoot!" the commander scrambled to finish dressing.

Trev rolled her eyes fondly "I'll meet you down. Be sure to look presentable."

"Yes, executive mom"

"Toddler commander"

"You didn't say that!"

"Try to hurry up" the Andrastian smirked and started towards the elevator.

Shepard called after her "Oh, I just remembered! Make sure Joker doesn't play the 'Imperial March' when Linron docks in like he promised to do. No matter how hilarious that would be."

Trev frowned in confusion "The imperial, oh! The music from the vid, I remember. Yes, that would be inappropriate."

"But fun"

"I think we could do better"

"We should have a theme song!" Shepard's eyes practically lit up.

"Garrus would love that"

"And you wouldn't?"

"In theory yes, in action no"

"Since becoming Alliance you're a stick in the mud" the red-head pouted.

"I am wonderful and you know it"

"Hey, guys?" Joker interrupted, "Hate to rush you but Wrex is almost here and the people at C&C are getting restless since neither of you is there."

"They're sticks in the mud too"

Trev chuckled "But of course. Joker, I'm on my way."

"Wait for me, I'm almost…" and then Shepard tripped over her shoes.
"Behold, the champion of humanity" the blonde announced theatrically.

"Hero of the Citadel and Conqueror of the galactic core" the red-head said with as much pomp as she could despite still being sprawled on the floor.

"We blew up the Collector base, hardly conquered the galactic core"

"Details. Don't you want to be a conqueror of the galactic core?"

Trevelyan tapped her bottom lip "It does sound appropriately heroic."

"We should tell Hackett to amend our files"

"Putting it on my 'to do list'"

/ 

Wrex was grinning widely, quite a fearsome sight, as the Normandy's shuttle made way towards the surface of the salarian homeworld. After all, they were here to pick up the greatest treasure of the krogan. The only thing it would make it sweeter would be if they actually didn't have permission. But then he wouldn't get to be smug about his diplomatic victory.

Shepard sighed "Wrex, would you stop grinning, it's getting on my nerves. And I feel you are jinxing us."

"This is a big day for the krogan" the massive clan chief said yet again.

"And all it took for giant squids to land on our planets" Garrus quipped.

"They will find Tuchanka to be a hard world to conquer" Wrex thumped his fists together.

Liara gave him a smile "I have no doubt about that. Hopefully now that there is a tentative alliance we might get a better chance at surviving until the Crucible is built."

"Yeah, the device" the krogan chief lost list smile, "Do we know what is does yet?"

"No" Shepard sighed, "But we don't really have a plan B."

"Humph"

"Me too, buddy, me too"

"We are approaching the coordinated of the STG base" Cortez announced from his pilot seat.

"Well, they are not firing at us, that's good news" Garrus hummed.

"Still don't trust them" Wrex's eyes narrowed.

The red-head shrugged "Linron wasn't happy with us…"

"Understatement" Trev fake-coughed.

"…but I'd like to think she saw reason. If she denied us she would be standing alone."

Vega nodded "Not very smart when facing the Reapers."

Wrex chuckled derisively "Salarians, phe. They think they're so smart but they aren't."
Cortez interrupted "We have been cleared for approach but not for landing yet."

The krogan sneered and unsheathed his shotgun "Oh I am landing."

Shepard put a hand on his forearm "Wrex, diplomacy, remember?"

"This is krogan diplomacy"

"Oh boy"

Trev chuckled "Big part of diplomacy is having a big enough stick to threaten the other party with."

"An enraged krogan is a pretty big stick" Garrus commented drolly.

Wrex smiled widely "See Shepard, they agree with me."

"Snipers are a thing Wrex" the commander rubbed her brow, opting out of her helmet since the nature of this mission was supposed to be purely diplomatic. Having four armed people and an angry krogan with her was already straining that concept to the limit.

Cortez kept hovering the shuttle over the landing pad and when Shepard looked at him, he shook his head "I am still to wait."

"Fuck this, I'm taking the females and no lizard is going to keep my people form me" the krogan growled and abruptly opened the shuttle doors and jumped out. Immediately red dots appeared on his skin, signalizing the presence of the aforementioned snipers.

Shepard was just about to do something drastic when a harried looking salarian ran onto the platform and waved at his colleagues "Stand down! All stand down, they got clearance!"

"Humph" Wrex made no motion to put away his gun or stop glaring.

The Spectre rolled her eyes and turned to the salarian who quickly apologized "We received the message only moments ago."

"Cool" Shepard shrugged with forced nonchalance, "Well, now we're here and we're buddies so how about we get to it?"

"Of course" the salarian nodded, "We will need some time to prepare though, as I said the transmission arrived only moments ago."

"Moments ago my ass" Wrex growled.

"Also, perhaps it would be best if your krogan friend stayed here? On the landing zone? I'm afraid he would cause an unnecessary stir" Wrex surprised all of them by shrugging "Fine with me. As long as I get what I came for, I won't wreck your pretty little base."

"Don't worry, I'll handle this" the Spectre said with confidence.

The krogan chief nodded "God. Try to hurry up, this whole planet smells wrong."

"I think it's quite lovely actually"

"Phe"
The group split up – Shepard cast a meaningful glance at her new second in command and Trev nodded, after all it would be better not to leave Wrex alone with the salarians. The other way around as well, to be honest. As punctuated of a specimen of yagh getting transported somewhere unknown not far from them. Trev got a small smile on her face remembering the last time she fought a yagh. Liara and Shepard seemed to have a similar reaction, only causing a grimace instead. Ahh, good times.

Wrex leaned on one of the mysterious machines and managed to look completely unbothered despite the entire platoon of STG agents keeping a very close eye on him. Trev smirked – this was a well-rehearsed routine, she did it as well when she was on guard duty – no matter where you were, or with who, the knights-divine looked completely self-assured and bored. Since Shepard put her more on less on babysitting duty, she hooked her thumbs behind her utility belt and stilled completely, keeping an eye on thins in a true guard-like manner. The krogan chief gave her a snorting chuckle and a wink of acknowledgement.

After a long, long while of stillness and silence Trev's radio came to life with Miranda's voice "How's Sur'Kesh?"

The noble arched an eyebrow and slowly brought a hand to her ear to reply "Not bad. Wet heat though."

"Well, it is a jungle world" the former operative said disinterestedly, getting on the true topic of conversation, "It might get a little more interesting though."

"How so?"

"There might, and I stress the word might, be some Cerberus on the way there"

Trev's body went tense in preparation for a fight "What do you mean Cerberus?" Wrex's eyes got sharp and he stood straight. Their guards shot surreptitious glances at each other.

"There is some chatter about a sudden deployment and while the destination has not been stated I have enough information to wager on Sur'Kesh. Despite the planet being rather big, my money is on precisely the same STG base you're currently on"

"How would they know?"

"There are traitors in every war"

"What is it?" Wrex asked in a hard voice.

"Miranda thinks we might get company" Trevelyan frowned, "The unwelcome kind. She's not sure but I have learned never to bet against her."

Wrex nodded slowly and brought his hand to his own radio "Shepard, how's it going? We might have to hurry up."

"Not well," the human answered promptly, "For starters only one of the immune women survived."

"WHAT!"

"Yeah. Maelon wrecked their immunes systems pretty bad. At least that's what Mordin says, I believe him" Shepard hurried an explanation, "And why do we need to hurry up? Reapers?"

"Almost as bad – Cerberus. At least that's what blondie's girlfriend says"
"Shit"

"Should we warn the locals?" Trev asked, "No doubt they heard us already but as a gesture of goodwill. Cerberus being human terrorists and all."

"That's exactly why I wanted my alien crew along" Shepard sighed into the radio, "To show the willingness and need to work together. Illusive Jackass always needs to ruin everybody's fun. At least Miranda stayed at the ship. Did she give you an ETA?"

"No"

"Let's just get this done quickly. You alert major Kirrhe, I trust him, and we'll try to hurry up. Not counting on it though, paperwork's a bitch" the commander said and closed the communication.

Wrex sneered and leaned on the machine again, even if this time he was looking much more alert, ready to spring into action if any Cerberus operatives dared to interfere with his mission. Trev sought Kirrhe with her eyes and noted he seemed worried – no doubt their conversation carried and the salarian buddy system worked. Still, she approached the salarian to brief him about the situation.

"We have a robust planetary security" was Kirrhe's answer, a rehearsed line judging from his frown, "And STG bases have it tripled. Besides, we are not unfamiliar with Cerberus tech."

"Of course" the noble said amiably, "I simply shared our information in the spirit of cooperation."

Kirrhe shot her a millisecond of amused smirk and then he replied politely "And we thank you. Nonetheless you have nothing to worry about."

"Naturally" Trev inclined her head minutely and returned to Wrex who was rolling his eyes at her.

It took actually longer than expected. As explosions started resounding, shuttles incoming and troops invading, Trev turned to Wrex with a sigh "You remember how Shepard told you you were jinxing us with your grin? You jinxed us."

The krogan chuckled and took his shotgun from the small of his back "My bad. But this also means no paperwork and the krogan female should be good to go. By force if necessary."

"Shepard will protect her" Trevelyan said surely, "Now let me only talk to Cortez so he hides and we can begin cleaning up."

The blonde didn't have to as a fully equipped Atlas mech got dropped onto the landing platform, nearly on top of the Normandy shuttle if its pilot didn't have the presence of mind to skedaddle.

"Let's take out the trash" Wrex's eyes glinted and he sped in the direction of the mech and now a boarding party of white-clad invaders.

Trev nodded and took out her assault rifle. The cover nearest to her wasn't perfect but she would be moving anyway so she positioned herself in the best shooting position while the enemy troops focused on the growling krogan. She targeted the infantry first, before they too could opt for cover.

The salarian snipers had much the same idea and helped out where they could, not only here on the landing pad but everywhere they could reach. That gave Trevelyan an idea and hoped the snipers would catch on – after a large group of troopers was taken out she brought her omnitool to bear and began the long process of stripping the Atlas of its shield. It took changing position twice but the task was done. The STG agents didn't hesitate and shot up the canopy of the huge mech with high-impact shots.
Meanwhile Wrex was darting around the landing pad without care, letting his shields and his fast regeneration to keep him moving. Trev no such advantage – she had to make due with hiding behind machines, railings and potted plants. Still, between them they managed to keep the landing pad reasonably clear, all the while chatting with Shepard to mark her team's progress.

It was a waiting game. Again. Trev was very much reminded of the holding the line at the Collector base.

The biggest pain in the ass were the Cerberus guardians, the ones that carried a shield. Trevelyan was still very much incensed that TIM had copied her look and targeted them most vehemently, especially since they were hard to kill. It is said that imitation is the best form of flattery, but the noble wasn't flattered at all. Another pain were the engineers which you needed to catch quick.

"Blondie, turret!" Wrex shouted from his position, finally diving behind one of the pillars.

Thanking the Maker Wrex didn't decide to charge this one, those turrets really packed a punch, regeneration or no, Trev aimed an overload, followed by several bursts from her mattock. When the construct went up in flames, the krogan went to town on the Cerberus engineer and his entourage. He even looked like he was having loads of fun.

Trev wasn't having fun – it was obvious the salarians weren't the only ones to have snipers and she got shot in her left arm and shoulder, preventing her from using her shield despite the painkiller function of medigel. Still, it was better than getting shot in the head, something she probably only avoided by chance. Or perhaps they had orders, who knows these days.

"Wrex, rockets!" it was the Marcher's turn to warn her partner. The rocket trooper in question was aiming from a hovering shuttle, staying very clear of the landing pad and out of charging distance. Smart boy.

The krogan reluctantly took cover and exchanged his shotgun for an assault rifle. Before he could fire, the shuttle pilot circled, trying to get his comrade a better position to fire from.

With both Normandiers in cover and focused on not getting blown up, two more shuttles brought in more regular troopers onto the landing zone. Only when one of the salarian snipers, and those numbers were dwindling fast, took care of the rocket-bearing soldier, Wrex and Trevelyan resumed standard operations. It was much more difficult now that the enemy infantry has managed to entrench itself. Or it would be if Wrex wasn't such a powerhouse, intent on saving the captive female krogan and his people with it.

Really, Cerberus never stood a chance.

Finally a whirling sound caught Trev's attention form the fight – it looked like the cargo loading device was finally going to bring the lone female krogan onto the landing pad. Shepard was still one story down and since the landing zone was particularly vulnerable it was up to Wrex and Trev to hold down the fort and clear out the remaining Cerberus troops.

"Cortez" Trev called the sharp shuttle pilot, "It won't be long now."

"I still can't land"

"I know, we'll take care of it, just be prepared"

"I used to be a boy-scout"

"Meaning?"
"… that we are always prepared?"

"Oh. Ok. Good for you"

"… thanks" the pilot said unsurely. Then he took a sharp breath "Uh-oh."

"Cortez?"

"Atlas incoming! Another drop like before"

"Joy"

This time though they didn't have to face the heavily armed and shielded mech alone as Shepard and the rest of the team burst into the landing area, looking only a bit worse for wear. But definitely pissed that Cerberus has crashed the party.

A loud BOOM! resonated though ought the landing zone as Shepard, vanguard extraordinaire, blurred into her signature move and charged everything in sight. Yep, definitely pissed – Liara didn't even manage to prime targets for biotic explosions and Shepard already took care of it herself.

Wrex's grin got blinding as he took it as a challenge and he and the red-head entered into a competition of sorts. The remainder of the team looked at each other and shook their heads fondly, staying in cover and mostly out of sight, targeting the stragglers and debuffing.

Mordin was chipper, surveying the carnage, getting strange looks from the veiled krogan woman he was staying beside. When he began something that could only be defined as a cheerleading routine, the female closed her eyes and muttered something about the good drugs.

"Missed this" the scientist told her with a big smile.

"I knew you were different from the other salarians on the base, but didn't know just how much" the krogan hummed.

"Wait till you meet Shepard" Mordin's smile got impossibly large.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Mordin onboard! Love him.
Shepard sighed and swirled the amber liquid in her shot glass. With another sigh she downed it and contemplated having another but the whooshing of the doors interrupted that thought.

"Oh, hello commander" Traynor said in a startled voice, obviously not expecting the red-head at the bar, "Fancy seeing you here. Is that whiskey?"

"Rum. Yo-ho-ho and all that"

"Bad day?" the brunette frowned, not recalling anything particularly drink-worthy occurring.

"Not really." Shepard shrugged, "Just disappointed."

"In what?"

"I just thought I get them talking, you know, the major races and all, and everything would come together. We would all unite and make a stand against the Reapers together" the red head explained. Then she noticed the lone raised eyebrow of the comms specialist and sighed in defeat, "Ok, not really thought per se. Hoped. Now the asari hide their head in the sand because Thessia is fine so far, the turians are desperate and so are we, the krogan will wait until the genophage is cured no matter how long that takes and the salarians hate our guts for the same thing."

"Mordin said the cure won't take too long. Definitely not the years I would've expected" Sam hummed, "He actually estimated a month which is pretty crazy but I guess he was already working on it. Still, genophage cured, that is going to be a feat."

"Yaaay" Shepard declared dryly and poured herself a refill.

Traynor stole the glass "What kind of host are you? Not even offering to share."

The red-head chuckled, stood up and went behind the bar to fetch herself another glass "My utmost sincere apologies."

"I'll forgive you this time, since you were feeling blue" Sam nodded imperiously.

"Most gracious"

"What's the deal with that? The talk I mean – Trev talks like this on occasion too" Traynor asked. Because Shepard snorted in laughter which caused her drink to spill she amended, "Ok, quite often, mostly when she's around Lawson. I mean, calling her beloved? That's decidedly singular."

"Well, we're not calling her Lady for nothing you know" the vanguard smirked. Then she hummed "Before I tell you, let me ask how's she doing as XO."
The brunette arched an eyebrow "She reports to you."

"But she has a station next to yours and you communicate all the time" Shepard shrugged.

Traynor did the same and answered "She's doing well, I'm grateful for the decrease of work I have to do."

"Any problems?"

"Like what?"

"I take it as a no" Shepard smiled to herself, "That's pretty awesome, considering."

"Considering what?" the specialist said tad impatiently.

"Oh, just that she's not from this universe"

Traynor cocked her head to the side "You're pulling my leg."

"Nope" Shepard said mischievously.

"The fuck?" was the still skeptical reply.

"Interdimensional bridge and all that"

"This isn't funny at all"

The Spectre pouted and looked up "EDI, would you please tell specialist Traynor?"

"Lady Trevelyan is indeed from a different dimension. Her speech pattern reflects a society similar to our Middle Ages. A failed Cerberus experiment brought her here"

"No"

"Yes" Shepard said in an exasperated tone.

"No" Traynor shook her head.

"Yes"

"No"

"Traynor, where's your sense of wonder?"

"In a different dimension" the honey-skinned brunette replied dryly.

Looking at the frowning specialist Shepard smirked and told EDI "She's starting to get it."

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"How's your arm?" Miranda asked her lover who was lounging on the bed, reading.

Trev looked up and smiled "Perfectly fine. I still wonder about your world's medicine, so fast-acting and wide-spread. Doctor Chakwas said I should rest it a bit if I have the opportunity to, but otherwise I'm good as new."

"You actually listened to Chakwas, I'm amazed" the brunette smirked, "Now if you only learned to
"duck."
"I'll be sure to remember that for next time"
"You better, I actually grew attached to having you around" Miranda said offhandedly.
Trevelyan beamed "As did I."
"What are you doing anyway? I expected you occupying Shepard's spot over the galaxy map as usual"
"It does well for the soldiers to see their officers alert and working" the former templar repeated the words of seeker Martin, a colleague of Cassandra's, "And I'm working on finding out if the leak about the STG base came from the Normandy or somewhere else."
"Wouldn't EDI be more appropriate for this task?"
"Yes, she's doing the majority of the work" Trev grimaced, uncomfortable with that, "But it is the XO's duty to investigate matters affecting the discipline and conduct of the crew and make recommendations concerning these matters to the commanding officer."
Miranda eyed her suspiciously "That is a direct quote from the Alliance manual, isn't it?"
"Perhaps"
"You're such a teacher's pet" the brunette rolled her eyes fondly.
"Who's the teacher in this instance?" Trev smirked, "And I merely like to do my work well. I keep my own morals, thoughts and goals. Not a, how did you out it, ah - Alliance's brainless sheep."
"No" Miranda smiled mirthlessly, "If that was the case they would've made you Spectre."
"Yes. Williams" the blonde said darkly.
"Indeed" Miranda smirked to herself, knowing how her lover disliked humanity's second Spectre, "Horizon still?"
Trevelyan's eyes narrowed and she pursed her lips "Not only Horizon but also Mars – I heard about it from EDI. And all that time inbetween. Shepard might hold some good-will towards that woman out of sentimentality and remembrance of their hunt for Saren, but I have no such compunction. Williams is a grunt, rigid, linear thinking. Easily manipulated with only a little research. And she's been set against Shepard, that makes her dangerous. Whether Shepard denies it to herself or not."
"I think you'll find the commander less accommodating than you might suspect"
"Good. And how do you know that exactly?"
Miranda rolled her eyes "You're not the only one that talks to her you know."
The blonde pouted in a dramatic fashion "Traynor is usurping my place enough, I don't need you to do it as well."
"I think Samantha has different designs than you" Miranda chuckled.
"Yeees" the former templar smiled, "Fraternization or not, I would support that relationship should it happen. Although with Liara on board it might be a bit awkward. Then again, our dearest
The brunette smirked "I was rather surprised she went down to Sur'Kesh. Also I am curious – does Traynor even know about Liara? Being Shepard's ex I mean?"

"Not sure. But on an unrelated note, I'm pretty sure the leak to Cerberus didn't come from this ship"

Miranda nodded in satisfaction "Seems Perkins and Tamm were the only ones then."

"What did Hackett do with them anyway?" Trev asked.

"Sent them somewhere they could be useful but harmless I would imagine"

"Hm. Have you read the material Liara sent? Operatives suicide pill almost right away"

"I did. Seems I handed my resignation at the right time" Miranda sighed, despite all a bit sad about the organization she was part of for such a long time.

The Andrastian smiled "You were always quite smart."

"Flattery will get you everywhere"

"How about right here" Trev patted the bed beside her, "You're not working anyway."

Miranda contemplated that for a moment and then nodded. She sat down on the bed and took off her boots. When she laid down Trev put her reading material on the nightstand and cuddled into her. The brunette chuckled "You're awfully lazy today."

"I've got a doctor's note, I'm allowed"

The brunette chuckled "Very well. But only because you finished your homework."

Trev hummed and snuggled even closer. After a few moments she let her lips brush Miranda's neck. When the noble's mouth got more insistent, Miranda sighed contentedly "You ought to rest your hand."

"Don't need a hand to what I have planned"

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Trev held back a sigh as Traynor shot her yet another strange glance. EDI wrote her, after the blonde messaged her about the strange behavior, that Shepard had shared Trev's origin to the comms specialist. Keeping that in mind, she let it be. Even if it was starting to get on her nerves, especially since the rest of the bridge crew noticed the glances as well and were now doing exactly the same, trying to divine just why Sam was doing it.

Much to the XO's relief EDI spoke up "Trev, you have asked to be notified when the arrival to Mulla Xul is imminent. This is the case."

"How long?"

"Thirty minutes"

"Thank you, EDI" Trev smiled and brought up her omnitool to notify the ground team. The she turned to Traynor "I'll be in Med-Bay with Wrex."
"Aye-aye"

The Marcher called the elevator and took it to the Crew Deck. She replied to the nods of the several crewmen she passed and used her XO authorization to enter the locked Med-Bay. The sight inside was quite amusing – Mordin was happily muttering to himself, fluttering between his samples, while Eve curiously looked on. Wrex on the other hand looked supremely irritated but bearing with everything in the name of curing his people. Doctor Chakwas was content with sitting in her chair and reading a medical journal.

"Blondie" Wrex acknowledged the former templar with a nod.

"Chief" Trev used the same bored tone, "We will be arriving soon."

The krogan grinned "Great! I don't think you will have any trouble with the Aralakh leader but I'll pen you something. Not that it will help you with the rachni. Vicious little bastards."

"So the records suggest"

"HA! Records" Wrex scoffed, "Did Shepard not tell you about Noveria?"

"She did. That's why she really hopes it's not rachni" Trev hummed.

"Yeah. I told her releasing the queen was a mistake"

Trev shrugged "Can't really judge. But I wager I would've supported Shepard – genocide is unthinkable. It was for the rachni same as it was for the krogans."

"Not the same thing" Wrex said dangerously.

"No, I agree with the lieutenant" Eve chimed in calmly, "The genophage is killing us slowly, but killing us all the same. All of us, all our race. And for the same reasons."

"Not the intention" Mordin said distractedly from his microscope.

"But the result nonetheless" Eve shrugged.

"Well, I need to suit up" Trev smiled with false brilliance, turning to flee from the debate she sparkled.

"Thanks for that" Chakwas said dryly.

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"Isn't it against regulation for the CO and the XO to go on missions together?" Vega hummed when the Normandy shuttle took off, destination 'possible rachni caves'.

"Don't care" Shepard shrugged.

"Good" Trev nodded tightly, "You did oath it after all. Besides, this is the second ground mission since the appointment. It's useless asking now."

Garrus shrugged "This whole team is packed with VIPs anyway."

Everybody paused for a moment and then subtly turned to Vega, the only 'normal', who puffed up "I have Very Impressive Pectorals."
"Ugh" Trevelyan grimaced, Shepard nodding along.

Vega sighed theatrically "At least Cortez can appreciate me."

"In your dreams Mister Vega" said pilot called form the controls.

Miranda turned to the commander and smirked knowingly "Are you going to brief us on the rachni? After all, you spent quite a lot of time talking to specialist Traynor. She did say her lab studied the rachni and their methods of communication."

Shepard blushed and hurried to put her helmet on "They spit. Stay clear."

"A very valuable piece of information" Garrus teased, "Truly, had no idea about that."

"Shut up"

"So I guess the Liara ship has sailed?" the turian's mandibles flicked in a smirk.

"Next topic" Shepard crossed her arms.

"'Cause I'd be all for it" Garrus still didn't relent, "She actually reminds me little bit of a Saren-hunt Liara. With a better sense of humor."

Vega coughed "I'm with Shepard, we could go for another topic."

"You'll never be part of the gang if you're a stick in the mud" the sniper waved him off.

Trev chuckled "You really did brush up on human idioms."

"Idioms are interesting!" the commander perked up, "Did you know that in drell language…"

"Nice try Shepard" Miranda smirked, "Back to your love life."

"Kill me now"

"No need to be so drastic. I'd say Traynor likes you lively"

"You could bring her back to life anyway" Trev smirked.

Shepard sighed "I'm looking forward to the rachni. At least they don't talk"

"But they don't loooove you like we do" Garrus grinned.

"I'm not sure if I'm glad Liara decided to stay on the ship doing 'brokery stuff'" the red-head grimaced, "On one hand if she were here you might shut up about this, or… tease even more."

"Nah" Trev shrugged, "Wouldn't wasn't Sam to get flayed with an asari's mind in case it sits wrong with her."

"Yes, little T'Soni is pretty grown up these days" Miranda nodded, "I had been surprised when I met her on Omega regarding your body, she was nothing like the dossiers. Gone was the shy maiden and in her place was somebody who would not hesitate to, as you remembered correctly, flay someone with their mind."

"Yeah" Shepard said sadly.

"And back to Shepard liking the shy maiden type now" Garrus announced happily, making Vega
roil his eyes and sigh.
Trevelyan shook her head "Traynor isn't shy."
"I'll amend it to 'nerdy type'" the turian grinned.
Miranda nodded "That works."
"We're here commander" Cortez announced.
"Thank Mary and Jesus" Vega sighed in relief.
Garrus winked at the bulky marine, letting him know it was not quite over, merely postponed and then was the first to disembark when the shuttle was given the all-clear.
The team was met by several suspicious –looking krogan, so almost standard krogan, and the chief of the company. And wasn't he a surprise.
"Grunt!" Shepard exclaimed happily.
"Battlemaster!" Grunt smiled widely, "And Lawson and Trevelyan."
"Egh, egh" Garrus coughed pointedly.
The young krogan chuckled "Garrus, the tolerable turian."
"That's me!" the sniper made a theatrical gesture.
"We can catch up later" Grunt lost his smile, "We were just waiting for you to…"
"Not that you were needed" one of the krogan soldiers huffed from nearby, shrugging when Grunt growled at him to be silent.
"As I said, we were waiting for you to enter the caves. The scouts ventured in the several days ago, but they're krogan, some might be alive. Still, the mission is to find out what happened and whether it was rachni or not" the Aralakh chief briefed.
"Alright" Shepard nodded, "We are ready when you are. Lead the way."
"Hey Grunt!" Trev called after him when he made a motion to return to his men.
"Yeah?"
"Rachni, are they squishy?"
"Heh, heh, heh"
Miranda rolled her eyes as the duo high-fived "Children."
The ground team joined by Wrex and Eve were sitting at one of the tables in the mess Hall, waiting for the light on the Med Bay's doors to go green. Inside Chakwas and Mordin were working on Grunt that despite his perfect krogan constitution was in a pretty bad shape. Still, having redundant organs probably saved him. Rachni husks were no joke.

Shepard was biting her nails despite the disgusted glare Trevelyan was shooting her, doubting herself for the release of the rachni queen. Both on Noveria and now here. The war effort needed allies, no matter the species or history. Both Miranda and Trev had already talked to her, even Sam did, but the woman was still tearily looking at the doors of the Med Bay.

"Vicetus" Wrex growled at the newcomer that was lingering at the edge of the mess hall.

"Wrex" the turian nodded. He seemed to contemplate something and then plowed right though, "Commander, if I could have a word in private? I won't keep you long."

Shepard nodded with a sigh and stood up. She turned to the ground team and said "Get me if the situation changes."

At Trev's nod the Spectre followed Victus further away to relative privacy. The turian spoke softly "I know this is an inopportune time, but such is war."

"You want to know when we will get to your lost turian patrol"

"Indeed"

"We'll get Grunt to the Citadel and we'll go right into Krogan DMZ" Shepard announced, "With the reapers on Tuchanka, the Citadel is a better option for care. Once there, this will be the first item on the list."

"Thank you commander" Victus nodded gratefully.

"I'd still like to know what was the mission" the vanguard continued in a hard voice, "Turian special ops on Tuchanka? Talk about fishy."

"I cannot…"

"Blah, blah, blah" Shepard rolled her eyes, "I know. Classified and all that."

Victus was a bit offended "Yes. Classified. It is a matter of galactic security."

"All the more reason to share"

"I cannot. You will have to trust my word that it can only help our almost-alliance and thus the war against the reapers"
"Joy. Well, as I said, we'll get right on it"

The Primarch nodded again "Thank you. Also, I hope your krogan friend makes it."

"Yeah me too" Shepard nodded and the two parted ways. The red-head returned to her previous spot next to Garrus, who was the only one left of her ground team. She arched an eyebrow at her friend.

"Miranda got pinged and Trev was called away by Traynor" Archangel shrugged.

"Cerberus?"

"Seems so. Trevelyan told her to pass it on to Hackett, that we can't get to it right now" the turian hummed.

Shepard nodded "Good call. Do you know where the trouble is?"

"No" Garrus shook his head, "But Trev seems like a good XO."

"Is it bad I was pretty hesitant? If Hackett didn't suggest it I would've never even thought of it"

"Me neither. I mean we saw her struggling with turning her omnitool on"

"Exactly! But yeah, she's good in the role. And it really helps I no longer have to deal with requisitions, inspections and the like. Traynor has a much lighter load as well, she was really working herself to the bone"

"True"

"Now I've got the time to fiddle with my new flamethrower"

"Shepard…"

"What?" the woman said with barely concealed glee, "It worked like a charm! And I know Trev was jealous. Kept looking at it longingly and muttering about giant spiders of Thedas."

Garrus sighed "You almost burned my fringe off when we had to crawl in that one place, the cave in. Like the tight space wasn't enough."

"It was a bit claustrophobic" Shepard admitted, "The whole place was creepy. I'm glad we're out. And I'm doubly glad Grunt didn't die in that horrible place."

The turian nodded "I was sure we had lost him. When he came out of that cave all covered in blood like a goddamn hero… that was epic. All it was missing was a soundtrack."

"Goddamn hero" the red-head repeated in a sad tone, "That reminds me of Zaeed."

"Ah, his 'thick low-born Fereldan accent'" Garrus smirked, "Pity accents don't carry in translators."

"That would be cool" Shepard nodded, "So you if you compare me, Miranda and Samantha, you hear no differences?"

"None. As you don't hear me, Victus and Sparatus any differently"

"How do they sound to you?"

"Eh. I don't know" Garrus frowned, "It's just different. Rhythm and intonation. Some words differ.
Can't really say."

"Bummer"

The light on the infirmary's doors flicked to green, getting their attention. Chakwas who came out of Sick Bay a moment later was smiling, a fact that made Shepard and Garrus sigh in relief. The elder woman confirmed "Grunt is fine. But I'm keeping him under because I know he'd protest being shipped to Huerta. He needs rest and some more treatment, but he will make a full recovery. Minus one or two primary organs."

"That's great" Shepard grinned.

Garrus nodded "I knew he was a tough bastard."

"Indeed. Now you may vacate the premises, Mordin went back to the genophage cure and said you distract him" the doctor smirked.

"We're in another room entirely!" Shepard arched her eyebrows.

"Scram"

The red-head shook her head as she took off "Getting thrown out from rooms in my own ship."

"Do I hear back-talk?"

"No, doc!" Shepard quickly reassured. Garrus was trying really hard not to laugh, getting smacked in the arm for his troubles.

"That goes for you too Vakarian"

"Yes, doc!"

Shepard leaned towards her friend and whispered "See, it's a reflex."

Garrus nodded sagely.

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"You know," Miranda hummed as she was trying to get out exploded husk guts out of her armor, "I think T'Soni is onto something with staying on the ship. I might not be THE broker, but my Cerberus-centered network is pretty useful too. I might spend some more time on it rather than go in such charming places."

"And miss all this?" Garrus made a theatrically sweeping motion to encompass the piles of rubble of the krogan home world.

"Precisely"

Shepard chuckled "Chin up, Lawson. Take in the sights. Smell the adventure."

"I am" the brunette tried to wipe the whitish bile from her chest plate, "It stinks."

"Should've opted for a closed helmet" Garrus hummed.

Trev chuckled "You got something on your hair."
"Oh for heaven's sake!"

"Studies show that couples who have a common activity have a better chance to be happy and to stay together long-term" EDI-bot chimed in.

"See?" Shepard smirked at the glowering brunette, "It's scientific. You continue being part of the ground team and you and Trev will live happily ever after."

"Well, you can't argue with that, now can you" Trevelyan winked, "Besides, if we compare this to the previous ground team, we're positively tiny."

The commander nodded "With Liara only part-time, we have five members. And we're pretty much expected to save the galaxy."

"I miss Tali" Garrus sighed.

"Yeah"

Trev hummed "Still no idea where the quarians are?"

"Liara might know" Miranda shrugged, "But following the pattern I'd say they are somewhere near Rannoch."

"What makes you say that?" Vega asked.

"If the krogans have brought up the genophage while the world is crashing down, I'd put good money on the fact that the quarians are somehow meddling with the geth"

"Shit" the latino cursed, "Just what we need right now."

Shepard hummed "After we deal with the krogan-turian-human alliance, we might want to check on that. The quarians have the biggest fleet out of all the races. We could use that."

"Indeed, but that fleet is hardly in pristine condition" Trev sighed, "But they would be useful for evac, resupply and the like."

"Don't let Tali hear you say her people's fleet is a heap of junk" Garrus smirked.

"Your words, not mine. And I will brief Tali accordingly" the former templar delighted in saying.

"Shucks!"

"Another escape pod right ahead!" Vega announced.

"Survivors?" Shepard asked.

"None that I can see"

"Let's move along"

Garrus tsked "This is looking bad for Victus junior, half of his men dead. It's a mark against senior too."

"We don't know what happened" Trevelyan hummed, "Reserve your judgment until then."

"Fair enough"
From that the team lapsed into silence as the terrain got even harder to navigate and scale. The turian ship had really done a number on the place, which surely wasn't stable by any stretch of the imagination even before the crash landing. Fortunately it seemed to have settled and that the squad would not die under the rubble.

The next wave of reaper troops hit them when they spotted another escape pod, this time filled with turian survivors who were valiantly trying to keep the reapers at bay despite their injuries and utter exhaustion. Still, they were able to move on their own when the enemy was defeated which was good as the way was filled with too much rubble to join up.

"Is it me or Junior chose the very worst place to crash" Garrus muttered angrily when his foot slid due to all the mess and he very nearly fell.

"I don't think he was aiming at anything in particular" Miranda shrugged and took Trev's hand to hoist herself up a very large piece of rock.

"Maybe he did. We don't know squat about what they were doing here. It's shady as hell" Vega said angrily.

Shepard smirked "Well, if senior isn't sharing, maybe the son will."

"It might be prudent, I don't like the sound of this at all" Trev agreed.

"Reapers incoming" EDI warned them from the top of the pile.

The rest sighed and climbed up as well, only to pause in hesitation. Finally Shepard cleared her throat "Well, the good news is that we have more survivors. The bad news..."

"The bad news is a big fucking dragon" Vega was torn between awe, dread and rage.

"Harverster" EDI corrected, completely unaffected.

"Trev! You're the expert, how do we proceed?"

"Really, Shepard? We fire a big rocket in his face, what do you think? My so called strategies include swords and arrows!"

"What?" Vega was completely flabbergasted and was almost left behind as the rest rushed into the best position to snipe the giant beast.

"His left wing is already damaged, let's down him!"

"We should make some distraction, the turians can't hold out much longer"

"I miss Cassandra"

"You just said the Thedas version is out"

"It is. But knowing her she would just snort and bash its head in with a shield"

"Why can't you do that?"

"It was an embellishment"

"You're just lazy"
"I'm not doing dragon rodeo just for your enjoyment"

"That would be epic. Something to tell your children about"

"I dread the coming of mini-Vakarians"

"Shit, shit, shit! It's coming here!"

"Well, we pissed him. I'm good at that"

"I'm fairly sure the Illusive Man had a screenshot with the Councilors' faces when you hung up on them the first time"

"Does he use it as a screensaver?"

"Not to my knowledge"

"Hey guys? How about we go back to the dragon…"

"Harvester"

"Damn it EDI! Who cares!"

"You need to chill Vega"

"It's diving for us!"

"Awesome, target the eyes, that always works"

"Why don't you have your Cain with you?"

"The Alliance confiscated it. Apparently it isn't safe to carry a mini-nuke around. Who knew?"

"It's not a nuke, it's…"

"Snore!"

"Beloved, since when is Shepard interested in technical details"

"Since it goes boom?"

"I like boom"

"I like boom too, but only if it's the enemy side that blowing up"

"I thought it was implied"

"Your JAG must've really loved you"

"Hey, I was considering law school at one point!"

"And?"

"I prefer doing the boom"

"I'd like to once more point out the dra.. damn it, harvester is still very much alive"
"You're such a buzzkill Vega"

"I'm all for a buzz after a fight"

"Good idea! Hey guys, after this the drinks are on Vega!"

"The ship's bar is free"

"Well, technically the captain is paying for it since the Alliance would not fund booze"

"But Miranda, we don't have a capt.. damn! I am paying for it?"

"Indeed. I took the liberty of adding to our shopping list. It's hidden under the column 'stimulants' in the Sick Bay's budget"

"I love you as my XO"

"She does look good in uniform"

"Miranda! You have competition in Garrus!"

"I heard and I'm not worried"

"I don't know, I do have a pretty badass scar"

"And blue paint, don't forget the paint"

"You're right Shepard, I have paint too! Ha Lawson, beat that!"

"I have boobs"

…

"Damn, you win"

"Naturally"

"Are turians even attracted to breasts?"

"How about one word – asari"

"Sorry, dumb question"

"The harvester is down" EDI announced calmly.

Shepard smiled "Well, about time."

Vega shook his head "You guys are loco. I said it before and I say it again."

"Hey it works! We just took down a dragon!"

"Harvester"

"Bah"
The area surrounding the huge explosive device was deathly silent. The bomb that would practically obliterate Tuchanka's population, not to mention the ground team and the turian platoon that was trying their best not to let the explosion happen. As the countdown came near the inevitable zero, they all watched with bated breath as Lieutenant Tarquin Victus climbed up, practically dangling from the structure, desperately searching for the trigger mechanism.

Then the turian tore a panel open. Just as the structure that held the bomb began to creak really ominously and hunch to the side, he took out one of the fail saves. Then another. As it was clear how this would end, he did it for the third time, and then plummeted down with the majority of the structure.

…

…

"No boom?" Miranda cocked her head to the side after the long silence.

"No boom" Trev confirmed elatedly.

"No boom today. Boom tomorrow. There is always a boom tomorrow" Shepard took off her helmet and rubbed her brow.

Vega nodded "We should get to the turians."

"Yeah"

Garrus looked at the half-collapsed structure and sighed "The Primarch will be proud. Tarquin died a hero. Not that it will be any easier to hear."

"We'll have to tell Wrex too. What a shitstorm" the commander said tiredly.

"You do that, I'll brief Hackett" Trev proposed.

"Wanna swap?"

"Nope"

"Yeah, didn't think so. But f it comes to blows I'll spread the wealth"

"It won't come to that. There will be yelling but things will calm down"

Miranda nodded "Mordin said he's almost ready to present the cure. That'll help immensely."

Garrus geave out an almost-whistle "Damn, never thought I see the day. And Wrex can be reasonable. And if not Eve will explain. Spirits, she's one hell of a woman."

Shepard smirked "Totally. Wrex will be whipped in no time."

"The turians are coming here, mourning faces everybody" Miranda looked down.

"I'm more inclined to angry" Vega growled, " Fucking classified bullshit."

"'Matter of galactic peace', at least that was spot on" Trevelyan hummed.

"Understatement of the age" the bulky soldier shook his head.
Garrus flicked his mandibles "What I don't get is Cerberus. Why wreck this alliance and kill the krogan when we are at war. TIM claims he battles the reapers as well, but this is practically the opposite of that."

"He's indoctrinated. He must be" Miranda mumbled.

Trev took the brunette's hand before it was shaken off "We have already theorized that."

"Better than the alternative" Garrus shrugged.

"Which is?" Vega asked.

"That he's just mad. Still quite possible" the turian elaborated, "I thought so a few times during our Collector run."

"No use speculating - Cerberus is an enemy, nothing changed" Shepard cut the discussion, "Let's get out of here."

Trevelyan brought a hand to her ear "Cortez, do you copy?"

"Need a pick up?"

"Please and thank you"

Shepard turned to the AI "EDI, could you message ahead to Wrex that we need to talk in the war room? Just so he doesn't start with some procedure or other of Mordin's. Call the Primarch too."

"Yes Shepard"

"A shitstorm" the red-head repeated her previous sentiment with a heavy sigh.

"Maybe you could stay in armor" Garrus smirked.

Trev shook her head "That would only tempt him to hit harder."

"There will be no hitting" Miranda said sternly, "Just tell them to get their shit together as you did with Victus junior. And scowl."

"You do a good scowl" Archangel nodded sagely.

"Yeah" Vega wholeheartedly agreed.

"Most impressive" Trev hummed.

EDI turned to them "Organics tend to listen to you more closely when you do so."

"Thanks" Shepard glowered.

"See? Excellent" Garrus said in a satisfied tone.

"Keep it up" Miranda nodded.

The commander crossed her arms "You guys are horrible friends."

"A bomb?" Wrex growled, "The genophage wasn't enough? You had to plant a bomb on my
"Here we go" Shepard mumbled and looked longingly at the alcove that held the QEC on which Trev was talking to admiral Hackett.

The Primarch was understanding yet unmoving "The decision was made hundreds of years ago. All parties involved are long dead. The situation is changed."

"Not changed enough to tell us about that damn bomb!"

"Enough!" Shepard involved herself right from the start, not letting this delve into a drawn discussion. For her it was over. There was a problem and now there wasn't. Now she only had to make the two men agree with her and shake hands. She delivered nicely what she had prepared on the shuttle to the ship but Wrex was still seething, even if less aggrieved, merely angry.

Fortunately, or thanks to EDI, Mordin strode into the war room, ignoring the tense atmosphere. He smiled widely "Genophage cure ready."

Victus smiled, Wrex grinned. Both leaders caught each other's eye and their expression morphed into caution.

"So? United against the reapers?" Shepard asked pointedly.

"We do have bigger fish to fry at the moment" the krogan huffed and then gave a definite nod.

"We're all in" Victus said resolutely.

Shepard turned to Mordin and mouthed "Love you."

The salarian cocked his head to the side "Thought preferred asari."
"How are the preparations going commander?" Hackett asked, his hands clasped behind his back as usual.

Shepard gave him a small smile "Going well, admiral. Mordin has devised a plan and both the krogans and turians are going to work together implementing in. Trevelyan is coordinating with them as we speak. There is a big reaper in the way and we'll need all the force we can muster."

"Good, good" the man nodded, "And you even had the time to take out a Cerberus cell. That one is a big win for this sector. We need all the orbital guns we can get."

"It was on the way" the red-head shrugged, "We had time while everything was being prepared. How's the Crucible going?"

"Well, the rachni really sped things along" Hackett chuckled in disbelief, "Gave everybody a big shock though. But they are excellent workers and seem to have a knack for weapons of mass destruction."

"Cheery thought"

"Indeed. I'm very glad they are on our side. Seems like releasing the queen has paid off"

"Yeah" Shepard tried not to sound too relieved about that.

Hackett smirked at that and then turned somber "I spoke with Anderson a moment ago. Earth is doing as well as can be expected, but he's managing." The woman merely nodded at that, her throat too tight to answer. Hackett nodded too, understanding all too well "Anything else commander?"

"No sir"

"Keep me posted. Much lingers on this krogan-turian alliance and we need to make it work"

"Yes sir!"

With another nod the admiral disconnected, leaving Shepard alone in the QEC room. Well, with EDI - she was ever-present. She sighed as she always did after hearing about Earth or another similarly cheery subject and headed to her terminal in the CIC. As she passed though the war room she noted the turian Primarch deep in discussion with Trev who looked a bit harried. Shepard smirked and passed them with a small wave. Thankfully neither seemed to have any matters to present her.

After she passed the gossipy duo at the security checkpoint, she made a bee-line to specialist Traynor who seemed well-rested for a change.

"Hey"
The honey-skinned officer turned to her startled "Commander? I thought you were at the QEC. I was just about to call you."

"What about?" Shepard asked and leaned against the terminal, getting a gentle yet firm shove to get her ass somewhere else.

"You have Dalatrass Linron on the line"

"I was just there" the red-head whined.

"Yes" Traynor smirked in amusement, "And now you have to go back."

"Any chance it's something trivial?" Shepard asked with faux-cheer, "Perhaps she just forgot something on board. Like her favorite pen or something."

Sam arched an eyebrow "Who writes in pen those days?"

"Ok, not a pen. How about her lucky cape?"

"Or maybe the keys to her skycar"

"Since when those need a physical key?"

"Since you proposed writing in pen"

"I don't write in pen. Linron might"

"Come to think of it, Trevelyan always grumbles about typing, she definitely prefers pens" Traynor tapped her bottom lip.

"Maybe we could get Linron one of Trev's and she might not notice the difference"

"Not if it is her favorite pen"

"True" Shepard nodded sagely, "Well, I better take it. She might need to write something soon."

"I don't think it's about a pen" Sam's voice lost all humor, "She's calling on the super-secret hush-hush channel."

"Noooo" the Spectre whined again.

Traynor nodded "The S2H2 channel is no joke."

"Super-secret hush-hush channel is the official name?" Shepard perked up, "That's awesome."

"It's not official per se…" the brunette trailed out, "It's the working title and nobody got around to change it."

"In the powers vested in me by Admiral Hackett and the Alliance, I make the title official!"

"So mote it be" Samantha smirked.

"EDI, change the manuals accordingly!"

"Doing so now"

Shepard wiped a fake tear from her eye "I love this ship."
"Love you too"

Traynor erupted in laughter drawing more than a few stares. Especially when it devolved into that kind of laugh when you're practically silent, just slapping your thigh like a retarded seal. Shepard blushed and rubbed the back of her neck, waiting for the show to be over.

When the comms specialist calmed down she wiped an actual tear form her eyes and grinned at Shepard "You better take it. She doesn't look like the patient kind."

"Yeeeah. She's not"
"Well off you go then"

Shepard saluted mockingly and turned on her heel, once more braving the security checkpoint. As she went she heard Traynor talk to EDI and congratulate her on a joke well done. Shepard smiled – not all machines were bad. The reapers might be a very valid point in the 'cons' column but she was firmly pro-AI now. She knew even Tali was seriously questioning the hate that was practically bred into her after talking with EDI. And Legion.


Shaking her head to clear her thoughts Shepard approached the communicator's controls once more.

"Dalatrass?"

Shepard woke up in cold sweat. Her dreams were getting weirder and more depressing, not letting her to feel refreshed even after a long nap. It didn't help seeing the new addition to her dream, the krogans, all whispering to her, blaming her. Even if she decided not to go through with the deal the Dalatrass. She had hesitated only for the briefest of moments, before rejecting the idea completely. Still, it was laying heavily on her conscience. She will have to tell Wrex. Or Eve, she was far more reasonable than him. When the genophage was cured, for real, the last thing they needed was extra hate laid on the salarians. Even if their leader was a cunt.

To be perfectly honest she too feared the unleashed krogan horde, but that will not matter if they did not win the war. Wrex was wiser and smarter than the average krogan, but he too lusted for conquest and the return to glory. Thankfully Eve would be able to keep him in line. Provided she survived the war. And Wrex survived the war. Heck, the krogan race survived the war.

The red-head sighed – it was all such a mess. She remembered fondly when hunting one man down was all it took, with the side dish of Citadel politics.

"Shepard?"
"Yes, EDI?" the woman smiled, glad for the interruption.
"You requested to be woken at this time"
"Huh? I actually slept five full hours. Neat"
"Four hours and forty-one minutes"

Shepard smirked "Thank you for clarifying. So, we're about to cure the genophage. How do you feel about that?"
"… I am unsure"

"Yeah, me too"

"Trev and Liara seem excited"

"Hm. Well, we have to cure it first. Is the team already at breakfast?"

"Doctor T'Soni is still in her room"

"Figures" Shepard grimaced – her ex was really turning into a recluse. A dangerous recluse with the Shadow Broker's network, however diminished, at her fingertips. She really needed to get her out more.

The commander made a quick trip to the bathroom and dressed in her fatigues. Then she took the elevator to the Crew Deck to join her squad for the meal. Breakfast was a quiet affair, the solemn mood dampening the usual silliness and jokes. Shepard took the space to hash out the plan once more even if it was pretty basic and with the big reaper in play left a good part to improvisation.

Mordin and the krogan were already waiting for the squad by the shuttle which was getting the final check-ups by Cortez. As soon as he spotted Shepard he snapped into a salute "Everything's in order. We are ready to go on your mark."

"At ease" Shepard smiled, "We still need to armor up. Eve, how are you feeling? Mordin said he did some intensive tests."

"I feel eager to end the suffering of my people"

Behind the two krogan Miranda rolled her eyes at the needlessly dramatic reply for a simple question and got a reproaching glare form Trev for it. Garrus chuckled and retuned his gaze at the weapon's bench. He already had his own strapped to his armor, now he was just looking for something extra "I found a nice and shiny rocket launcher."

"MINE!" Shepard bellowed and rudely interrupted the talking Wrex.

The turian smirked and put the weapon aside "Grenade launcher?"

…

"No takers?" Garrus hummed in surprise.

"I take it then" Vega grinned.

"Another rocket"

Trev took it from his talons and sighed "Please don't bulk up too much. We are meant to be the infiltration team."

"You can infiltrate better when no one's alive to stop you" Shepard went with the usual vanguard response.

Miranda shook her head "Than it's not infiltration."

"No, it's 'walking in'. And it works like a charm"

"Once the explosions calm down" Trev muttered.
"Yep" the red-head grinned.

"We need the heavies though" Vega retuned to the matter at hand, "No way there aren't gonna be brutes. Those are made from krogan, right? We need something with punch."

"Killed some with a sword" Trevelyan mumbled proudly but accepted his point.

Miranda's eyes narrowed "Yes. And we talked about that."

"Oooh, did you get spanked Trev?" Garrus smirked.

"No"

"Try not to sound too disappointed about that" the sniper flicked his mandibles in amusement.


"Let him dream. Mr. Vakarian has been single for a long time. He lives vicariously through us" Miranda smirked.

"It's practically in his name" Shepard noted, "Now as much as I'd like to continue this line of conversation, we need to go. The clans should be gathering now. Right, Wrex?"

"At the Hollows" the Urdnot chief nodded, "Our meeting place. We will take an armored convoy from there. Gave your pilot the coordinates."

"There will be some resistance, especially about professor Solus" Eve warned calmly.

Wrex shrugged "I'll make a speech, knock some heads together, and we will all go riding into the sunset."

"Estimated time of arrival to the Shroud facility is mid-day" EDI corrected. Wrex huffed and rolled his eyes.

Shepard smiled and made a motion to the shuttle, "Let's go. Wouldn't want to make a liar out of EDI. Cortez! Take us to the Hollows!"

"Aye-aye"

Before the commander could follow Eve into the shuttle Trev caught her elbow and let her slightly to the side. Shepard arched an eyebrow "What is it?"

"Just wanted to advise you to tell them about the Dalatrass after they make that speech and collect the clans"

The red-head nodded "Yeah, thought so too."

"Oh, sorry then"

Shepard shrugged "Better to be redundant than get your head blown off by an angry mob of krogans."

"Yes, let's make it just that one krogan" Trev's eyes fell on a very satisfied looking Wrex.

"Yeah. Fun times ahead"
"Well, one thing is clear" Garrus hummed, "Wrex might be the Chief and all, but Eve is calling the shots."

"Definitely wearing the pants in that relationship" Vega smirked.

Miranda smirked as well "Wouldn't say that too loud, you might find yourself on the wrong end of a krogan headbutt."

"There is a right end?" Trev said absently, her mind still on the gathering at the Hollows, "That was a great speech. And I'm glad we didn't have much trouble. That could've gotten troublesome fast."

Archangel shrugged "But it didn't. And on that note I'm glad we're not riding with Wreav."

"I agree" Miranda hummed, "I am also glad we're not with Shepard, Wrex and the rest. They will not be happy campers after they hear about the salarian deal."

"What salarian deal?" Garrus frowned.

One brief explanation and a long recital of Spanish expletives later, the 'B squad' as Shepard jokingly dubbed them, fell silent. Even with this new information and the fact that they were right now on the way to cure the genophage, the topic had been exhausted quite a while ago – the entire ship, and no doubt beyond, had discussed it from all angles.

The ride was long and bumpy, the Shroud being built quite a distance away. Since the transport had no windows so it wasn't possible to "admire" Tuchanka's views, Garrus proposed playing a skycar game. His idea had been swiftly rebuffed but as the ride grew more boring, Trev sighed and agreed. Their combined puppy dog eyes and pouts roped in the two remaining squad members however reluctantly.

They were in the middle of guessing what person from Earth history Garrus was trying to be when their tomkah skidded to a stop. Trev took out her pistol and opened to doors of the transport to check what was wrong. The rest followed, eager to stretch their legs.

"Shepard, what's up?"

The red-head huffed and made a motion for the krogan next to her to speak. The scout rolled his eyes "The road's out."

"Artamac wing is already engaged, we need to join the fight" Shepard stressed.

"I can see that" the krogan relied grumpily.

"Can we go off road?" Trevelyan asked.

"We might have to" the scout frowned, "But we will take much more time to get to the Shroud. You should call off the turians. While I'm not against dying turians, right now it would be inconvenient."

"Charming. And I already tried" Shepard bit her lit in worry. Right now her plan was being foiled by a simple road malfunction. Unacceptable.

"They should've listened then" the krogan scout squinted at one particular fighter that was flying towards them, smoke trailing after it.

"Shit" Shepard cursed and her hand went to her radio, as did the scout's.
The turian aircraft swerved and managed not to hit any of the convoy but the structure over them. The crash and following explosion cause the road to shake and break up even more. All the tomkah whirred back to life and sped up in different directions to avoid the falling stone and falling off the road. Most of the truck managed to use the new debris and cross to the other side of the road as was the original intention.

"Shepard, me and the female are clear, where are you?" Wrex called on the radio.

"What do you mean where I am? You fucking left me behind!"

"Didn't you catch a ride with blondie and the rest?"

"NO"

"That sucks"

"No kidding"

"We can't double back" Wrex continued, "We're still on the road and we need to get the female and the salarian to the lab."

"What are we supposed to do then? Hitchhike?" Shepard said acerbically.

"Most of the trucks are full, but I'm sure someone will take you"

"Commander," Eve interrupted, "You could cross the city of the Ancients. We have to circle it, but you could go right through. We'll pick you up on the other side."

"My calculation show if you hurry we should arrive at the same time. I have taken the reaper and it's laser into account" EDI added helpfully.

Shepard huffed "That's easy for you to say, you and Liara are in a cozy truck."

"Suck it up Jane, and start running" Liara said with surprising amount of irritation.

Garrus leaned towards Trev "Jane?"

"They did date. You expected Liara to call her Shepard all the time?"

"Uh, yes?"

"Men" the former templar rolled her eyes but her tone was light.

"Does that mean that Miranda calls you by name?"

"On occasions. I like Trev"

"You know now I won't rest until I get your first name, right?"

"Go for it"

Shepard finished speaking, she had switched onto a private channel when Liara took the comm, and turned back to her team "Let's go."

"There was an entrance not far back" Miranda hummed.

"Awesome" the red-haired said dryly and broke into a jog.
"Methinks Shepard's pissed" Garrus said in a stage-whisper.

"Yeah" Vega was smirking, for once not minding gossip.

Trevelyan turned to Miranda "Well, I don't think she and Liara even talked at length since we came aboard. Might be the time for it."

"I agree" the brunette smirked.

"You and EDI will not be watching it"

"Spoilsport"

Finally the rest of the team reached Shepard who thanks to her Cerberus upgrades and an early start was quite a few steps before them. They jumped a short distance to reach the entrance into the ruins of the city Miranda had mentioned and ventured into the dark. Quite literally, as the entrance brought them into the old tunnels underneath the city.

After a while of running only in the light of their omnitools and helmets, Garrus remembered "Oh and by the way, I was being Xena the warrior princess."

Shepard almost missed a step "What?"

"We were playing a game. And Xena isn't real" Miranda sighed.

"She's not?!" Garrus was not only seriously taken aback but also quite disappointed.

"No buddy" Vega shook his head with a smile.

"I was planning to name my daughter after her should I ever have one" Garrus said sadly, "Xena Vakarian. An ultimate badass like me."

Shepard stopped running and turned to her turned friend, her jaw nearly hitting the pavement "Xena Vakarian. Xena Vakarian."

"I like it" Trev shrugged.

"Not bad. And we should continue on if we don't want Wrex to leave us behind a second time" Miranda said pointedly.

"Xena Vakarian" the red-head mumbled again but listened to Miranda's advice and resumed their run.

The squad stopped once more after only a short distance. The former Cerberus operative, and most definitely the most scientific-minded among them, knelt beside the carcass "Rachi husks."

"I hate those" Vega tsked.

"They are rather hard to kill" Trev agreed, "And their reach is amazing."

"I hate the little ones" Shepard sighed, "And I left my flamethrower on the ship."

Garrus smirked "Yeees. But you have a nice and shiny rocket launcher."

"That's something at least"
They proceeded with much more caution now with the confirmation of reaper presence. Still, they encountered no one. The only thing of note, apart from the sturdiness of the old tunnels most of which were in excellent condition, were the murals that lined the walls depicting ancient krogan.

Then a big tremor shook the entire corridor, making them spot yet again. Vega brought up his rifle, studying the way which they came with its light "What was that?"

"Earthquake?" Trev proposed.

"Might be the big reaper" Miranda analyzed.

Yet another tremor shook the place, but nothing could be seen. Realizing that it would be best to be out of ancient tunnels that could collapse and bury them for all eternity, the squad's run turned into a sprint.

"shhh.. Shepar... shhh... can you hear... e?" Wrex's voice came broken on the radio.

"I can read you. Badly though" Shepard immediately replied.

"Good. How's it going? Because nothing is stopping this cure. Not even your sightseeing tour"

"Hardly sightseeing Wrex" Shepard irritated, "I don't like sight that can kill me. You guys feeling these tremors?"

"Not up here"

Vega growled "Not only are we away from the fight, we might end up buried alive."

"It could be maws" Wrex proposed.

"You're kidding right?" the red-head looked hurriedly around, as if she could spot one right now.

"It is said that Kalros, the mother of all thresher maws, lives in this region" Eve explained.

"Which is another reason to get your ass out of there. Step on it!"

With that the connection cut out. Shepard frowned "Did he just hung up on me? This is becoming disturbingly the norm. I used to hang up on people, not the other way around."

Garrus ignored his friend and chose to focus on the more important thing "Kalros, mother of all thresher maws? Is it just me or that doesn't sound good at all?"

Vega frowned "If they gave it a name, they don't believe they can ever kill it."

"The Shai-Hulud" Trev smiled, "Now nobody can tell me otherwise now, Tuchanka is Arrakis. Thresher maws are sandworms. All we need is the spice now."

"Did you hit your head?" James asked carefully.

"Read a little Vega" the noble huffed.

Miranda chuckled "Trev got recommended an old book called Dune and its sequels. The way she devoured it I feared for the Chant of Light in terms of favor."

"You're exaggerating" the Andrástian rolled her eyes.
"Not really" Miranda smirked, "Anyway. It's from there. And I have to agree that there is some resemblance like you said. But if you ever try to ride a thresher maw like the characters did with sandworms, you're on your own. And I will enjoy having the entirety of the double bed to myself again."

"I think that with a little study it could be done" the blonde mumbled.

"Trevelyan"

"It's not like I'm going to try it anytime soon"

"Good. Because…"

"Wait a moment" Shepard interrupted, "You want to ride a thresher maw?"

"… no"

"Good" the commander shook her head, "I mean, I would never allow a pancake to ride on my head, that's practically the same thing. Maws eat people. With much gusto too."

"What she said" Miranda nodded resolutely.

"And they travel underground" Garrus chimed in.

Trev huffed "I just want to look into it, alright? I'm not going to jump on this Klaros and take it on a stroll. I'm not stupid. Please change the subject now."

"You brought it up" Miranda's eyes narrowed.

"Well, if you ever manage I'd bet you'll never have trouble parking" Garrus shrugged.

"Because she'd be dead" the former Cerberus pointed out.

The XO perked up when they exited the tunnels into a spacious and well-lit room, causing the desired change of subject. The subsequent fight with the reaper troops was the cherry on cake.

"Shepard, do you read?" Wrex contacted them again.

"Loud and clear this time. This place is magnificent. And there is actual green here!"

"You're looking at hope, all that's left of it on Tuchanka" Eve commented, "This was once a world full of beauty. Given the chance it can be again."

"That's great but we have a problem here" Wrex interrupted, "The plan's changed."

"What kind of problem?" Shepard frowned.

"The turians had to retreat. We're still far off and they were just getting slaughtered" the krogan informed.

"So what's your idea?"

"Not mine, hers"

"Eve?"

"Kalros" the female krogan took the comm, "We summon her to the reaper."
"We what now?"

"It might just work. We'll brief you once we meet up" Wrex commented.

"Thanks for keeping me in the loop"

"Well, the turians are your project"

"You keep safe too. And we are in the sunlight again so we won't be long"

"You better. Kalros won't be waiting for us either"

…

"Well, at least we're not going to ride it" Miranda spoke up after the lengthy pause.

Trevelyan groaned loudly while the rest chuckled. Shepard turned back to the shine's exit "We still need to catch the trucks. Let's worry about Kalros later."

The squad resumed their rush, translating it into the subsequent fights with the reapers, making them more reckless but at least not late. They didn't even pause at the beauty of the forgotten shine. It was the tremors and the brutes that kept slowing them down, but finally at the very end of the shrine pass the team has managed to catch up with their ride. Even if the fit was rather tight.

"I am glad to see you all undamaged" EDI declared once the driver really stepped on it and drove them away from Kalros and towards the Shroud.

"Happy to be here" Garrus sighed and sat down on the nearest surface.

"It wasn't a smooth ride for us as well" Liara hummed, "The maw got Urdnot Wreav and his truck.

"No big loss" Wrex grinned.

Shepard nodded absently "So what's this about Kalros?"

As the team watched the interaction between Shepard and the two krogan leaders, Garrus sighed
"Do you also get the feeling that sometimes we're just props? I'm happy to be the side-kick but some praise and gratefulness sent our way would be appreciated."

"Better to stay in the shadows" Miranda shrugged.

"I wouldn't mind a special handshake" Trev hummed.

"We're soldiers, we do our duty" Vega said, ride ringing from his tone.

Liara cocked her head to the side "Some appreciation once in a while isn't so bad."

"We have already been designated as Shepard & co" EDI informed.

"What? By whom?" Garrus tuned to the AI.

"That was a joke"

"Phew" the turian smiled
"No. The joke was that it was no joke at all" EDI said, her voice tinged with satisfaction.

Vega chuckled "A double bluff. Not bad."

"Thank you" the synthetic nodded.

"Shepard & co" Garrus repeated with a sour expression.

"We saw turian generals saluting you. Isn't it enough?" Miranda arched an eyebrow.

The sniper shrugged "Sure. But I want a krogan kid named after me."

"What's with you and children today?" Liara arched an eyebrow.

"Wrex was talking my ear off at dinner. Mostly about making them though"

"Thank you for the visual" Vega grimaced.

"Yes. Stop speaking now" the Ostwick noble shook her head.

"I cannot recommend extranet searches" EDI spoke up.

All the organics made disgusted sounds. Miranda shivered "Well, that killed it."

Garrus nodded "Yes. I propose silence till Shepard's done."

"All in agreement?"

"Aye!"

"Silence it is"

When Shepard rejoined her team her big grin morphed into confusion "What's up?"

"Playing the silence game" Miranda shrugged.

"You lost" EDI deadpanned, making the rest chuckle.

The red-head arched her eyebrows and shrugged "Aaaaalright. Never mind. Reapers. EDI has already marked the two hammers. Everybody noticed their positions?" At the collective nodding the commander hummed "I was thinking that EDI could cloak and go for them while we distract the big laser and the troopers around."

"I agree about EDI, but you should take the other one" Trev proposed, "You can charge in and out."

"It would be faster" Liara nodded.

The red-head hummed "Sounds good. We'll see what the situation is. I imagine there will be quite a lot of resistance."

"We can handle it" Garrus said a bit prickly.

"We can, we also must make sure to keep an escape route clear. I don't want to be around while Kalros and the reaper have their tussle" Miranda reminded.

"That would be prudent" EDI said almost warmly and then raised her pistol to fire at the incoming troops. The rest of the squad followed suit, hashing out the plan for the hammer via shouts over
weapon's fire.

Once they climbed the stairs into another ancient krogan ruin, the remnant of an arena where the two maw hammers lay, they had to deal with another threat – the reaper itself and his big laser that killed everything in sight.

They hesitated for a moment, calculating the covers that could withstand the laser and the quickest routes. Shepard sighed and vaulted over the stone railing they were hiding behind. Vega was the first to follow. Next up was Garrus who chuckled "Well, they say fortune favors the bold."

"Yeah, but statistics favors the cautious" Miranda pointed out.

Trev chuckled "You're morose today."

"I dislike the higher-than-usual probability we are going to die"

"You were never this pessimistic"

"I never had too much to lose"

The noble's steps faltered, nearly getting caught by the laser. She scrambled out of the way just in time under the distressed glare of her lover. When Trev's heart rate calmed down some she turned to the brunette "You can't say such romantic things when we're running for our lives."

"Hardly romantic"

"The casualty of it makes it even more so"

"Less flirting, more running. And more shooting!" Shepard yelled form the point of their 'formation'.

"We can multitask!" Trev shouted back even if she looked appropriately chastened.

"So can the reapers – kill you and eat your brains"

"And now they can even step on you" Garrus said tightly after he had to slide to avoid one of said leg-like appendages.

Nobody replied to him, too busy fending off several brutes intermingled with human husks. EDI had shimmered and disappeared from view a while ago, hopefully working on the hammers.

"Ravager!"

"Fucking rachni" Vega muttered as he rolled into cover – a dangerous thing with the brutes on a warpath.

The artillery piece was taken care of by Garrus and his trusty sniper rifle, making it 'turian to the rescue' times two as the Hierarchy's Artamec wing came back and started distracting the reaper so the Normandy team would have an easier time with their plan.

It might have helped with the stomping and the laser, but the brutes and the rest of the ground troops didn't care in the least and kept them occupied.

"We can't hold out for long" Miranda commented.

"EDI's fast, won't be long" Trev said calmly despite the mayhem around her.
"You are correct" the AI contacted them all on the comms, "The hammers are now in effect. Advise to vacate the premises. Haste is recommended."

"You heard the lady. Run!" Shepard shouted from atom a small platform where she just took care of another ravager that died in a pretty blue explosion.

"Way ahead of you Shepard!" Garrus yelled back, halfway up a flight of stairs that while did not lead anywhere, it was possible to jump down on the road the truck were meant to take. Fortunately Wrex was had been contacted too and was speeding towards there to pick them up.

With a mad dash to safety the team made it to the truck and Wrex floored the gas pedal. With the two maw hammers doing their job they didn't have to worry about disturbing the sand too much.

Once a fair distance away and on the road once more the krogan chief stopped the truck and eagerly climbed it to look if their plan worked. Purely tactical interest. It didn't have nothing to do with the spectacular fight between organic and synthetics colossi. The battle for domination. The way Kalros attacked head on, nearly swallowing the reaper and then attacking once more form below. Nothing to do with the way the thresher maw wound itself around the AI like a python and tightening its hold more and more, until the pressure was crushing.

"Damn" Garrus breathed out when the red light flickering in the 'eye' disappeared.

"Damn" Shepard repeated as Kalros came with another pass to make sure she won and took the remains of the reaper with her underground.

Eve puffed up with pride "Kalros truly is the wrath of Tuchanka."

"Concerned. Shroud shows signs of damage from the fight" Mordin hummed distressed.

"What?" Wrex turned to the salarian and growled.

"Might want to get there now"

"Agreed" the krogan nodded and climbed back into the truck. The rest followed inside quickly, not wanting to be left behind by the eager Chief.

"What about the thresher maw?" Miranda asked.

"We'll have to risk it" Wrex shrugged.

Mordin nodded "Yes but I have cure ready. Eve not needed. She should get to safety and rest. Procedure taxing. Still in danger."

"Don't speak as if I'm not here" the female krogan grumbled.

"I could go with Mordin to the Shroud alone" Shepard proposed, "You guys take care of Eve."

"If the Shroud is seriously damaged, going near it with the only two reasonable krogan might not be the best idea" Miranda nodded.

"Grunt didn't seem too bad" Vega shrugged.

"Two out of three reasonable krogan then" the former XO amended.

"Whatever. I don't care how or who, I want the genophage cured" Wrex growled.
"Mordin and I are going. Alone" Shepard said in a hard voice that allowed no rebuttal, "I go as the official mediator of the krogan-turian alliance and Mordin because he's the only one that know what to do. And it's his project."

"What if there are more reapers present?" Trev frowned.

"Nothing survived Kalros" the red-head shook her head, "I have decided, you go with Eve."

"As you wish" Trevelyan said reluctantly.

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The entire krogan populace of the planet, along with the vast majority of the turian pilots, and of course the Normandy team, watched one of the most momentous events of the age. Well, if not for the fact the reapers were invading – that was a bit higher on the importance scale. But curing the genophage was right behind it!

An ash-like substance permeated the air, being dispersed by the Shroud before said structure collapsed. No matter, the deed was done.

"Mordin didn't make it" EDI informed the rest of her team, obviously having monitored Shepard's camera feed.

"Shit" Garrus cursed softly, even though he had expected it after witnessing a part of the Shroud exploding.

"Yeah" Vega nodded, "Finished the mission though. He will be remembered by an entire populace."

"Not a bad way to go" Trev commented.

"Don't you dare" Miranda said without much heat.

There was a long contemplating silence after that. They all knew it was only a matter of time before people in their immediate vicinity started dying. Still, losing Mordin was a blow. While he spent most of his time in his lab, and now in the Med-Bay, he was a friend. Well, for the team that was around during the Suicide mission.

"Is Shepard alright?" Vega asked EDI.

"Yes"

"Good. Chakwas will not be happy as is" Trev looked pointedly at her lover who was holding her ribs. Courtesy of a brute that like to throw things. And people.

Miranda scoffed " Says Miss Broken Arm. And judging form that beginning of a truly spectacular shiner, I'd guess you broke your supraorbital bone as well and god know what else."

"Hence doctor Chakwas being unhappy" the blonde smirked briefly, trying not to move too much of her face muscles. Now that the adrenalin has worn off, not even the medigel application was keeping the pain around her eye in check.

"I wouldn't mind a quick check myself" Garrus shrugged, he too not escaping the fight unscathed.

"My chassis is undamaged" EDI chimed in.

"What about you Vega?" Trev asked, being the XO and all.
"I'm fine"

The dark grey body EDI was using turned to him and scanned him in a moment "That statement is most definitely false."

"Macho men" the former templar rolled her eyes. That was one of the reasons she didn't like Vega overly much, same as Jacob. Always trying to prove something.

The soldier shrugged "Medigel is working and Chakwas can fix me later."

They fell into a silence again, observing the disbelieving yet ecstatic krogan. It truly was a sight to behold – even among all the death and destruction, life was finding a way to thrive.

As they waited, overlooking the ruins of the Shroud, Miranda of all people began to hum "I am the very model of a scientist salarian, I've studied species turian, asari, and batarian."

"I'm quite good at genetics (as a subset of biology) because I am an expert (which I know is a tautology)" Garrus joined in after an amused snort.

"My xenoscience studies range from urban to agrarian" EDI joined in, followed by Trev, "I am the very model of a scientist salarian."

Vega once again wondered just what the hell was going on.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Mordin...
Traynor walked into Port Observation, rubbing her tired eyes. She had a real hankering for beer, not her usual beverage, but it might've been due to the celebration on the dry and sandy Tuchanka, no matter how short their stay there had been. With the war going on, the Normandy wasn't really eager to party. Well, party with krogan. Otherwise they were looking forward to some brief shore leave, away from the depression of the reaper invasion.

"Oh" the specialist exclaimed softly when she realized that contrary to her expectation she was not alone in the bar room.

Miranda looked up from her padd, disinterestedly nodded at the other woman and returned to her reading. What was peculiar was that the usually very reserved operative had Trev's head in her lap, stroking the blonde hair while the XO was snoozing happily.

Sam mouthed 'adorable' and made a bee-line for the bar.

"Has the Primarch taken off already?" Miranda asked, not really keeping her voice down.

"An hour or so ago" Traynor said as she selected one of the surprisingly many brands of beer that the Normandy stocked. "He didn't want any fuss so didn't mind going during the Gama shift."

"Garrus stayed behind?"

"Yes" the Brit smiled and then let her gaze fall onto Trevelyan.

"She won't wake up" Miranda chuckled, "For one that is used to fighting and war, she's a surprisingly heavy sleeper."

"Well, she's must be exhausted. All of us are"

"At least it is for something" the former Cerberus hummed, "The turians and krogans are onboard, as well as what is left of humanity's forces. Even some salarian STG teams are promising support behind their Dalatrass' back."

"Good. Shepard was of the opinion that the Dalatrass is 'evil' and I happen to agree" Sam sneered.

Miranda smirked "Apt description. And she definitely hadn't done her homework if she thought her extortion plan might work. Especially since she practically asked Mordin be killed."

"Glad Shepard didn't"

"It would put on a bit of a hamper on your fantasy of the dashing Spectre sweeping you off your feet" the operative's smirk got wider and more teasing.

"Sweeping off my feet?" Sam cocked her head to the side, "My thoughts were more in line with her pinning me to the wall."

"Pffft" Trev let out from the surprised Miranda's lap, showing she woke up a while ago, "She got you there, beloved."

"Good one" the pale brunette nodded.

"Thank you, thank you" Traynor bowed theatrically.
"Got a blush anyway"

"Seeking to make other women blush? Should I be jealous?" Trev chuckled.

"Not of Traynor, she dreams of red-heads"

The blonde smirked "Yes. So, how is that going?"

"Is not?" Sam arched any eyebrow, "She's my commanding officer."

Miranda made a dismissive sound while Trev nodded, more sympathetic as she was used to the rigidness of the templar order "Sure, but with the reapers about, no one is going to care about that. At maximum they will be jealous."

The specialist grimaced "She's getting a ton of sex offers via email. How classy is that."

"How do you know that?" Trevelyan arched an eyebrow.

"She sorts the mail" Miranda explained slowly, to show how her lover was slow on the uptake.

Sam grimaced again "Ugh. I do. Not in my job description, but otherwise you and Shepard would get swamped. Everybody wants help and somehow they got ahold of this address. We get everything – from missing puppies to husk attacks."

"And sex offers" the former operative smirked.

"Now from krogan too!" Traynor exclaimed.

Trev's eyes bulged in disbelief and morbid curiosity "Sweet Andraste."

"I know, right!"

Miranda cocked her head to the side "Speaking of Andraste, Shepard told us she told you about Trev's origins. How come you never asked anything?"

"She did stare at me funny for a while though" the former templar hummed.

"Sorry about that" Samantha blushed minutely, "Couldn't help it. It's just so… you know."

"It is" the older brunette nodded, "That's exactly why I find it peculiar that you never asked."

"Mumblemumblemumble"

"Sorry, Traynor, I didn't catch that" Trev arched an eyebrow at Traynor's third blush of the evening.

Sam cleared her throat "I said that I like when Shepard tells it."

Miranda laughed "She does have a singular take on Thedas. But the original is always better."

"Thank you, love" Trev finally stopped pouting.

"Besides, aren't you tired of repeating the introductory answers?" the specialist asked.

"I am"

"You forgive me?" Sam fluttered her eyelashes mockingly.
Trev made a show of thinking "I will if you make a move on Shepard. Soon."

"As you see Lady Trevelyan is very unsubtle about matchmaking" Miranda shook her head.

The blonde shrugged unrepentantly "I never liked this in plays either. You like her, she likes you. Get to it."

"Poetic" Miranda said dryly.

Sam arched an eyebrow "Tell me, did your own romance progress so simplistically?"

"…no"

The paler brunette hummed "In all fairness you probably aren't scared that Shepard will strap you to dissection table in some Cerberus lab."

Traynor arched both her eyebrows seeing Trev nod to that and then shrugged "But I bet you didn't have nosy friends about pushing you all the time or a beautiful ex hiding a deck below."

"True" Miranda admitted.

"EDI was definitely interested in us being together" Trev countered, "She could count."

"As the nosy friend or the ex?" the operative smirked.

"I wouldn't have been capable of being in a romantic relationship at that point in my development" EDI replied from above.

"And now?" Traynor asked with interest.

"You aren't looking to two-timing Shepard and EDI, right?" Trev mock-gasped.

Miranda elbowed her lover in the cut and frowned "Hush, I want to know the answer to that."

"I believe am approaching that stage"

"Wow" the former Cerberus breathed out quietly. While AI research was never one of her specialties, this progress would stagger any scientist.

"I am happy for you EDI" Trevelyan smiled widely.

"Thank you"

"Love is pretty amazing to feel" Sam nodded and then said with genuine concern, "But be careful, it can hurt too."

"I have ready many books on the subject"

The three human women looked at each other in dread, all deciding on the spot to individually talk to EDI about relationships. Books are nice but most often they are fiction. That is the point of them.

"They were most informative"

"Oh boy"
Shepard yawned as she left the cabin that Diana Allers appropriated for her broadcasts. She held it in during her interview about the genophage cure and all that krogan affair, but now out of the camera's view she was free to do as she pleased. And what she wanted was to sleep. Alas it wasn't that easy. Bad dreams plagued her, more disturbing than usual. With Mordin's heroic sacrifice the whispers of the dead joined her usual dream fare.

Deciding a nap would be futile, she made her way up a deck and into the small kitchen area to make herself a cup of coffee. As she waited for it to be done, no way she'd drink that old swill that was already made, she looked at the wall that separated the kitchen form the former XO office, now Liara's room.

"Might as well" the red-head shrugged and took her freshly made beverage.

"A pleasure to see you, Commander Shepard!" Glyph greeted, happy to see her as always. 'Well, at least somebody is' Shepard thought mite bitterly as she greeted back, the byplay completely ignored by the asari she came to see.

"Hello Liara"

"Hey"

When the greeting didn't get her the desired attention, Shepard sighed "How's it going?"

"Well enough"

"Stop, All that talking of yours overwhelms me" the red-head said sarcastically.

Liara rolled her eyes but stopped her typing and turned towards the human "Well? You have my complete attention."

"That's great and all, but you really should get out more. You're turning into a recluse. I know your work is very important but you should find a balance. Everyone else is busy too but they manage. What you are doing is not healthy"

"But necessary"

"Ah. God-mode: Activated!"

"You're being facetious"

"Yes. Because some people are still capable of joking" Shepard said pointedly, "Come on, you know I mean it well. As a friend. We are friends, right?"

Liara's shoulders relaxed a tiny little bit "Yes, we are. I… I'll try."

"That's all I ask"

After a brief awkward silence Shepard asked about the Crucible, knowing that would get the asari going. Even if it didn't elicit such a level of enthusiasm that it could've once upon a time, it was still a good topic. Then when they somehow arrived at Tali and the quarians, Liara even smiled.

It was a surprising amount of time later when Shepard finally left the Broker's cabin, and definitely in a better mood than expected. She felt that she might've made a dent in that wall that was between them. Or more like between Liara and everybody else. The asari even said she would catch up with Garrus. Of her own volition!
Shepard started whisliting, getting confused but pleased looks from her crew. It was always better when your CO was happy after all. Naturally the mood didn't last overly long.

"Shepard"

The red-head groaned – when her XO was calling her on her omnitool it meant news. Rarely the news was good. "Yes Trev?"

"You have a call on the QEC. Traynor says highly classified"

"Can you tell me who from?"
The former templar surprised her "Councilor Valern."

"Is he calling to bitch about the krogan?"

"Unknown"

"Awesome. Just awesome" Shepard grumbled, "Alright, I'm going."

"Acknowledged"
The commander sighed and made her way to the elevator to see what the more bearable leader of the salarians had to say. She hoped it would be pledging unlimited support of his nation, but she wasn't that lucky. No matter how the entire galaxy would appreciate such a step. Oh no, with her luck it would be a new fabulous mission.

Shepard’s mood got even more sour when the salarian on the QEC appeared more worried than angry. "So, what can I do for you Councilor?"

Trev arched an eyebrow in surprise when she stepped into the elevator and Garrus already had the '1' of the Captain's Cabin pressed. When Shepard called her to come up to her bedroom/office she had assumed it had to do with the Normandy as she was XO.

"Shepard called you?"
The turian nodded "For a meeting."

"Do you know what's it about?"

"I had assumed it had something to do with the turian troops now that I am here officially to coordinate our forces” Garrus shrugged.

"Hm"

Both soldiers exited the elevator and were let in into the cabin proper. Shepard was sitting at her terminal, working on something with a concentrated frown. She told them to sit in the living room space below and that she would join them in a minute. Trev and Garrus looked at each other, sensing this would be something important, and obliged.

"Sorry for that, I had to finish something" Shepard stood up from her desk and joined her two friends. "So, I called you here because I got a disturbing call form Councilor Valern. I'd appreciate your discretion."
"Of course" Garrus scoffed, almost affronted. Trev nodded.

"Good" the red-head sighed, "So Valern has suspicions about Udina. He seems to be moving vast sums of money for reasons unknown. And worse yet to people unknown. We are setting course for the Citadel now to assist in the investigation."

"Vakarian, former officer of C-Sec at your disposal" Garrus said with a mocking salute.

"And why call me?" Trev hummed, "He called you in your Spectre role."

"True but I still felt my XO ought to know what I'm doing"

Trevelyan nodded, satisfied with the answer "I'll take care of everything for the ship while you investigate?"

"Yes. I want us to be ready to depart at a moment's notice" Shepard nodded, "If Udina's dirty we need to get to the bottom of it, but it can't hold up our fight against the reapers. I already asked Liara to focus on finding the quarians. We need them to join us as well. We pretty much asked everybody else, we can only wait on that front."

"I saw on the war map that we have support of the volus, hanar and drell, even what's left of the batarian fleets" the former templar recounted, "As far as races go, we are missing only the elcor. And of course the asari. I think we can count in the salarians as much of their military has pledged for us in the fight even against orders."

Garrus nodded "In theory it sounds really good, but we are still severely outgunned."

"We need more resources, hence the quarians" the red-head chimed in, "We need everybody and everything. Maybe we could try for the geth as well. Somehow try contacting Legion. Tali might know about that."

"That will go over well" Garrus turned up the sarcasm.

"No doubt" Shepard sighed.

Trevelyan nodded and then asked "If you don't need me for anything I'd start putting together a list of things to be done while on the Citadel. Cortez has some very nice ideas about some armor upgrades and Chakwas was asking for some things as well."

"You may go"

The blonde actually gave her an Alliance salute and with a nod to Garrus, she left.

"You know" the sniper hummed, "With that uniform on and all, I'd never have suspected she wasn't Alliance from the start."

Shepard snorted "She looks more Alliance than me in that officer uniform."

"She does know she can wear the field one, right?"

"Miranda liiiikes it"

"Ah"

"Although that knife is not regulation"
"But it's almost hidden so that could be overlooked"

"Sure. Especially if she rams that knife into everybody who says she should get rid of it"

"Yes, that would work"

"Joker, what's up?" Shepard asked when she reached the cockpit, the magnificent silhouette of the Citadel displayed in front of the front window.

The pilot adjusted his cap in worry "I've got a bad feeling. There is no reply from Alliance Control, not even 'please hold'."

"Try the emergency channels"

"I'm already trying but..."

"...bzz... shh... Normandy, you copy?"

Shepard squinted and then smiled "Thane?"
Canticle of Maferath

"What's it about almost certain doom that makes people think that this is the best time ever to stir shit up" Shepard growled as she was putting her armor on.

Garrus shrugged "Maybe they want to kill people they don't like before somebody else gets to them?"

"Grrrrah!"

Trev ignored the red-head's frustrated sounds and turned to Miranda "Just why TIM attacked the Citadel? What does he hope to gain?"

"I kind of stopped trying and I'm currently chalk ing everything up to indoctrination" the brunette shook her head.

"How come we didn't know about this?" Vega said heatedly, "Weren't you monitoring their feeds?"

"I'm not" Miranda huffed, "I have some access to some operations. Besides, judging from what I am getting now, I'd say while the operation was planned, the execution is rushed. He must've brought the date up when Udina had fallen into suspicions."

Shepard nodded "And what about you Liara? Know anything good?"

The asari shook her head "No. My network isn't what it was before the reaper attack. And I practically lost all my agents within Cerberus."

"Of course, people there get 'upgraded' with reaper tech" Trevelyan said with disgust.

"The Kodiak is ready, commander" Cortez interrupted.

"Good. Everybody set?" Shepard looked around, getting nods from her team, "Alright Cortez, take us away."

"You got my specs?" Garrus asked the pilot and sat right behind him.

"I did but EDI has managed to finagle newer ones. Don't worry, I'll get you to C-Sec"

"Bumpy ride?" Trev asked.

"Yes" Cortez, Garrus, EDI, Miranda and Liara all said simultaneously.

Vega shook his head "Citadel: the safest place in the galaxy. I'll never look at it the same way."

"Because in this control group five out of eight people know how to get to one of the most secure parts of the station at the drop of a hat? Yep" Shepard nodded, "And now I feel I didn't do my homework after getting the Spectre title."

"I think getting Saren was more of a priority" Liara chuckled.

"Sure. But I just realized I don't know any Spectres. Apart from evil Saren, dead Nihlus and evil Vasir. The only current one I know is Bau and only because he came to me" the red-head tapped her bottom lip in thought.
Trev shrugged "Shadow operatives usually prefer nobody knows them. Not even their own colleagues."

"But of course everybody knows the poster boy, or in this case, the poster girl" Garrus smirked.

Shepard groaned "On that note, never agree to have a VI made out of you. You might seem like a moron."

Miranda chuckled "Your VI is hilarious. Especially the glitch ones, those sound even more cheesy."

"I bet Saren's VI didn't sound cheesy"

"He didn't have one" Garrus said helpfully.

The red-head groaned again "Smart of him."

"I liked the Shepard dolls" Vega tacked on with a grin.

"Action figures" the woman in question mumbled as if that made it better, "And I didn't agree about those. The Alliance overruled me."

"The comic book was acceptable" Miranda shrugged.

Even EDI joined on the ribbing "Pity the Shepard Game got scrapped. The Alpha was promising."

"There was a game?" Shepard whined.

"Yes"

"Link please!" everybody on the shuttle except the vanguard exclaimed. Even Cortez who was heavily concentrating on not crashing the shuttle on the maintenance accesses and tunnels.

"Why, EDI?" the red-head pouted at the bot.

"Was I not helpful?"

"Oh very much" Vega grinned.

Liara nodded "Indeed. Shepard did tell me I should take more breaks. Now I have something to do on them."

"Cortez, how much further?"

"We won't forget even if Cerberus shoots at us" Garrus informed her cheerily.

"A few more turns, commander" Cortez replied even if Shepard's question was meant more as a deflection. The information did halt the teasing, everybody readying for a fight.

After a few considerably sharp turns they all could hear the sounds of gunfire. With their helmets on and weapons ready they waited for Cortez to let them out. Shepard went fist as usual, immediately blurring into a biotic charge to clean up the foothold, immediately followed by Liara and Miranda for biotic crowd control.

EDI blurred out of sight and Trev activated her shield to leave what little cover there was for the others. Garrus went last in his role as sniper while Vega methodically worked on the shields of nearby troops with his rifle.
Contrary to what they expected, there weren't too many C-Sec officers or even their bodies, but that didn't mean that Cerberus wasn't present in force. It took a considerable length of time to advance, more than usual as C-Sec took into account the possibility of an invasion to headquarters via the service tunnels and planned the layout accordingly.

At least they didn't have to conserve ammunition as they usually did against the reapers. This time they knew there was a handy armory where they could restock if needed. As such Trev and Vega went a bit overboard with grenades, making sure that C-Sec headquarters would never look the same.

"Bailey?" Shepard exclaimed with both surprise and happiness at the first officer they found actually alive.

"In the flesh" the man said and them grimaced, looking at his side where his hand was clamped tightly, "And apparently blood."

Miranda immediately knew down to the C-Sec commander and began manually applying medigel. With a grateful nod to the operative he quickly briefed them of the situations which was unsurprisingly quite bad.

"You said councilor Valern was here?" Shepard hummed, "Is he still alive?"

"I don't know" Bailey shook his head, "He was supposed to have a meeting with the Executor, something really hush-hush."

"Looks like not secret enough" Vega commented.

The C-Sec shrugged, hissing in pain as he did so "The rest of the Council got evacuated by Spectre Williams. Also your friend Thane is running around somewhere. He was actually the one to warn me. Without him this wound would be much worse."

"He contacted us too" Shepard nodded, "Do you know where the Council went? We need to have a chat with Udina. He was who Valern was suspecting of being dirty."

"The info and the money could have been for Cerberus. It would make sense" Garrus nodded.

"We should try finding Valern first" Trev frowned, "We can't accuse someone so high up blindly. Especially with collaborating with Cerberus, considering our previous well-publicized affiliation."

"I agree" Liara nodded, "Your trial, Shepard, made it widely known."

"Udina, huh?" Bailey grimaced, "Just when I was thinking that the war finally made him bearable. Help me up. I need to go to communications – my people need someone to coordinate them. And I'll direct you to the Council."

Vega and Trev lifted up the injured man, following the rest of the team that swept for any more remaining enemies. When it was safe Bailey limped towards one of the terminals and sat down heavily. Immediately he patched himself through to communications and set up a new, safe, channel for them to use.

"Let's go check out the surrounding of the Executor's office, we might find some trace of Valern" Shepard decided.

"I'll contact you when I have something" Bailey promised.
"Move out then"

As they ventured further into the headquarters the scene became grimmer and grimmer. It was obvious the officers were taken by complete surprise, many traitors in their midst. Bodies everywhere, even in the bathroom where two human men hadn't had even the time to pull their pants up.

All the gunfire and in some parts even grenades or flashbangs caused the sprinkler system to rain down non-stop, causing mild flooding.

"No Cerberus corpses" Vega muttered.

"Except those we made" Trev said with some satisfaction.

"Yes, about that" Garrus sighed, "Would you please stop freezing troopers? You know that it is always the C-Sec personnel itself that cleans up. And when those shards melt it's going to be supremely disgusting."

"But they might find it satisfying that their enemies ended as mere chunks"

"Ugh. I'm ever so glad not to be an officer anymore"

Shepard chuckled "You did say you ended up on the Executor's shit list more often than not."

"I would totally be on clean-up duty"

"I think everybody will be on clean-up duty after this" Liara commented.

"Yeah" everybody mumbled grimly.

They quickly replenished their supplies in the armory and then EDI did some creative work on the elevator to get them to higher floors where the Executor had his office. The scenery wasn't any better but they encountered many more Cerberus troops on which they could vent.

When the bullpen was clear of invaders, Miranda took a peek into the main office "Two dead salarians, guards I'd say. No Valern."

"That's tentatively good news" Shepard hummed and looked around.

"I see signs of cloaking" EDI announced, "Besides the seventh desk of the third row the floor below us."

The team quickly made it to the small ramp that led to the Executor to look down. Then as if he heard them, Councilor Valern decloaked himself. Or the timer ran out. Whatever.

Just as Shepard took a breath to call out to the salarian to reassure him another man appeared, jumping from a beam over them. He too had been obviously waiting for the Councilor.

"Nah-ah buddy" Shepard called down chidingly and jumped down, "Forget about it."

The ninja wannabe positioned so that Valern was between him and the firing squad "Glad you could join in on the fun."

"Your brain getting blown into pieces? Sure, hilarious" the red-head grinned, her pistol trying to get a safe lock.
"He's going to kill us!" Valern exclaimed helpfully, making everybody blink in confusion about its redundancy. Then they all chalked it up to extreme stress and the stalemate continued - obviously the assassin's orders weren't outright murder.

"Come on buddy" Shepard continued with mock-joviality, "Leave the nice Councilor be and go find yourself a pair of eyes in the Presidium. Drop my name, they'll give you a discount."

"Mighty nice of you"

"Indeed" Thane said as he suddenly appeared at the ninja's flank.

The assassin reacted faster than the ground team could, maybe with the exception of EDI. Thane though reacted on pure instinct, honed by the years of training and engaged the black-clad man in a lightning fast duel. Sword against gun, biotics against biotics, and the other seven people could only spectate if they didn't want to inadvertently give the advantage to their enemy.

Trev watched the action torn between envy at how the assassin wielded his blade and worry as Thane seemed to be lagging slightly behind his opponent.

It took only a fraction of a moment. A split second and Thane blinked in confusion as the assassin's single-edged blade pierced his armored coat and the torso behind it.

"Thane!" Shepard exclaimed in panic when the drell fell to the ground.

The ground team started shooting as one right away, but the assassin seemingly without effort dodged them all. Although he did seem to have decided his mission could not be completed now, whatever that was, and vaulted over the nearest railing and sped out of view.

"EDI, Vega, stay with Valern!" Shepard shouted and blurred in blue, following the Cerberus man. Thane tried to follow as well, but the synthetic body of the Normandy intercepted him, letting the rest of the ground team take that quest.

"Where is he?" Liara asked loudly, being the second-fastest of the group.

"Had a skycar waiting" the red-head replied bitterly.

"Calling one now" Miranda took initiative having arrived third.

"Thane?" Shepard asked in a tight voice, fearing the worst.

Liara sucked her breath "I don't know. Wounded but not dead but I'm hardly the one to ask."

"I called Bailey, maybe he can manage to send an ambulance" Garrus said hopefully.

"Bailey, right" the Spectre nodded and brought her hand to her ear, "Bailey? Good. Get the word out - Udina's trying to seize power. The Council's in danger. Do you know where they are?"

"They're being taken to a shuttle pad on the Presidium" the C-Sec commander replied swiftly, "Get some transport, I'll try to raise them on the comm."

"We've got two cars. One C-Sec and one taxi" Miranda reported the result of her effort.

"Taxi?" Trev arched her eyebrows.

"Everything's in chaos, we're lucky to get this" the brunette responded to her lover sharply.
"Split up" Shepard ordered, marching right to the armored of the two vehicles.

In the end Liara and Garrus joined Shepard in the C-Sec transport while Miranda and Trev took the taxi. Both cars got the coordinates from Bailey but the taxi was soon left behind as the commander's car was simply faster. Still, Miranda managed to get into the system and speed things up a bit, even if the top speed was still elusive.

Being behind, Miranda and Trev got the prime view of the ninja jumping on Sheprad's car in a truly cinematographic stunt and using his sword to damage the engines.

"Above us!" Trevelyan exclaimed.

"What?" Miranda frowned behind the controls, tearing her gaze from the Cerberus assassin.

The assassin's armored car smashed into them from above, veering them off-course. Then once more smashed into their side, this time managing to damage something. As all the controls started beeping and Miranda cursed as she tried to handle the flying car, Trev watched the armored car speed off and catch up with the assassin who effortlessly hopped inside.

In the end it didn't matter if the car was C-Sec car or taxi as both parts of the ground team crash landed not too far away from each other on the Presidium Commons. The only thing that could be said for C-Sec armored transport was that Shepard, Garrus and Liara managed to get down in a much better shape, while Miranda and Trev were pretty beaten up.

Shepard's face fell behind her helmet when the two lovers rejoined them – now they were all on foot, while the assassin was still catching up with the three remaining Councilors. Well, two Councilors and one traitorous son of a bitch.

"Commander?" Bailey contacted them, "You copy? Anybody? My instruments can't find you!"

"We're here" Shepard replied with a grimace, "We crashed on the Presidium. We're on foot now. The Council?"

"Can't contact them. Their guards are dead but I've still got vital signs on the Council. Udina's with them"

"Destination?"

"Unchanged"

"We're on our way"

"I'll try to slow the assassin down on my end, but he's slippery. At least with the communications back on we're holding our own with Cerberus. Even driving them back in some places"

"Any chance we could use that?"

"The closest to you are some asari commandos that were on shore-leave, but without them we might lose the floor. We have a lot of civilians there"

"We'll handle it ourselves then. You keep monitoring the Council and the assassin"

"Doing what I can"

Further discussion was interrupted as a white-painted shuttle arrived and with it Cerberus troopers. Two more shuttles joined the one that arrived before and it was a regular party.
"Smoke grenades, I hate those" Shepard grumbled as she fell into cover, not wanting to be exposed with the visibility so low.

The rest of her team only shrugged as each exchanged the added protection for better optics so the smoke didn't impede them as much.

"Snipers" Miranda voiced the bigger problem – the smoke and the snipers were doing a great job of keeping the squad in cover, all the while another two shuttles arrived, packed with reinforcements.

"We're not the only ones with slowing-down tactics" Trev gritted her teeth, "Hoping Bailey's proves better."

In the end it was actually the smoke that saved Miranda's life as the ripple of a cloaking device could be seen even while being distracted by weapon's fire. The former operative let out a strangled sound and she threw herself out of the way, barely avoiding getting pierced by a blade. One that resembled the one the assassin wielded earlier.

Trev roared and brought her own blade right onto the extended sword arm, chopping the limb off. The Cerberus operative, which looked like a rather lithe woman, didn't even mutter and tried to use her remaining hand and her biotics against Trevelyan. Garrus took her head right off with his sniper rifle, shattering the closed helmet and the head it had been covering.

"You alright?" Shepard shouted, trying not to get too distracted from her own duel with a group of heavily armored troopers.

"Yes. Close though" Miranda admitted.

"I'm sick of the Illusive man robbing ideas from me" Trev ground her teeth after assuring herself her lover was indeed unharmed, "First shields and now swords!"

"Imitation is the highest form of flattery" Shepard called to her, having finished with her opponent and clearing the way forward.

"I don't feel flattered"

"As long as he doesn't have the Smite at his disposal…" Garrus trailed out.

"You're right" the former templar relented.

"Well, who needs Smite when you have garages full of heavy mechs at your disposal" Shepard commented when she took a look around the corner.

"Right"

After getting rid of the remaining Cerberus troopers, and the Atlas, the Normandy ground team had to resort back allay and maintenance routes, the regular ones being closed, either by Citadel Security or Cerberus. Either way it meant yet another detour and in some parts uncomfortable climbing and jumping. At least the scenery was nice, if one ignored the drop of several dozen meters and no railing to help should they waver in their steps.

"You're getting close Shepard" Bailey contacted them again, "I have him by the elevators nearby."

"Great job Bailey!"

"He's overriding the elevator controls, otherwise I'd slow him down even more"
"Ask EDI if she can help you in any way"

"Will do"

Spurred on by the knowledge their target was so close the team took out the fresh wave of troops almost twice faster than before and sprinted to the mezzanine where the elevators were located.

"Dammit!" Garrus exclaimed as they just caught a glimpse of the assassin and some mechs before the elevator's door closed.

Bailey came to the rescue once more "Shit, he's going. Hang on. Here, take the other elevator, it should be dropped a little"

Garrus and Trev hastily opened the doors of the other shaft. The turian hummed in realization "We should be able to shoot the other elevator if we can catch up."

"Good thinking" Miranda nodded appreciatively.

"Your EDI overrode the assassin's code" Bailey shared the credit, "I'm making his elevator stop on every floor. Won't hold though."

Their elevator lurched and the team had to hold on lest be thrown off. The open electrical wiring and the sparks weren't really reassuring but at least they knew where to shoot once they reached their enemy.

Shepard didn't even have to give the order and everybody opened fire on the power conduit when the second elevator came into view. The elevator didn't handle the barrage well and after a while it dropped down, the group's own speeding transport leaving it decisively behind.

"Nice" Liara grinned.

"Good riddance" Trev nodded.

With a quick look about their surrounding, that of course kept changing due to their speed, the squad calmed as it seemed the danger has passed for now. They rode up in silence, all of them rather gripping onto something than make witty banter.

Of course that couldn't last long – Bailey contacted them again "It didn't hold. The hit man managed to get out and into another elevator. Can't control this one."

"Shit" Garrus tsked.

"We'll handle it" Shepard said resolutely into her comm.

"Some parts of the Citadel are calming down, maybe I can send more people to the Council"

"We can handle him, keep the civilians safe"

"Of course"

"Where's the Council now anyway?"

From Bailey's tone one could discern a smile "In the shaft with you, on another elevator. It's like a scene from Blasto. Once you're near we can stop them and you can join up. And give Udina the what for."
"Looking forward to that"

It didn't take long - EDI and Bailey really did a number on their ride. They contacted their guide to confirm the really reached the Council, and not for example simple cargo, and they all jumped.

The elevator didn't take the sudden added weight too well but it held on, designed for worse. Fortunately Miranda had the presence of mind to create a barrier under their feet so when shots started going off, it only perforated the thin metal of the elevator.

Williams' voice could be faintly heard as she ushered her charges out on the emergency stop. The sudden deceleration staggered the ground team but they held on. They paused for a moment so they could be sure they wouldn't be running straight into the gun of the newest Spectre.

"Liara, you first" Shepard ordered, "Barrier ready. Williams knows you and you're asari. Definitely not Cerberus."

"Aye, aye"

The rest of the team followed after the all-clear. Quickly regrouping they all left the little lobby and fanned out at the exit. Tevos, Sparatus and Udina gaped, all the while Williams had her pistol firmly pointed at the middle of Shepard's helmet. The shuttle they were trying to reach, or a shuttle more likely, was happily burning behind them, making the Council stuck. Especially when Trev hit the close button on the way they all came from.

"So it's you" Williams said, venom practically dripping from her voice.

Udina was quick to nod "Shepard's blocking our escape! She's with Cerberus after all!"

"Oh really?" Shepard cocked her head to the side, "It's not me that sold out the Council so Cerberus could brainwash them. It's not me that was taking bribes and passing information. It's not me that Valern suspected. It's not me that called in the cavalry when he was discovered. Sorry pal, Valern's alive and well and his evidence against you, Udina, is faring even better."

"Valen's alive?" Tevos said with some relief.

"Even after Udina's best attempts" the N7 reiterated the name so everybody would be clear on who the real enemy was.

"Nonsense!" the balding human exclaimed angrily, "Shepard's been with Cerberus all along, she can't be trusted. If she came here to rescue us surely she wouldn't have an arsenal pointed at our faces."

"Ash, put the gun down and we'll do the same. But not too down, the assassin was right behind us"

"Right. Behind you, how nice" Udina said acerbically, "Spectre Williams, your duty is to protect us! Do something! She's Cerberus!"

"Ash…" Shepard said in a tired voice, "You know me. And Garrus. Liara."

Williams shook her head, obviously torn, but her gun didn't waver "I don't really. I knew the old you, before Cerberus. And the old you saved the Council once before, didn't point guns at them."

"We don't have time" Liara cast a worried glance behind her and tightened the grip on her pistol. Shepard saw that the Shadow Broker was ready to shoot if need be so she put her own gun down
and hastily motioned for the rest of the team to do so as well. They were reluctant, but obeyed. Her
gaze returned to her former colleague "See, all nice. Now cuff Udina and let's call Bailey. He can
navigate us to safety."

"Cuff me?!" Udina shouted, "What for? You have no proof, you never do! I'm not standing for this!"
The human Councilor approached the nearest control panel and began typing away. Tevos
approached him "Cam down. I'm sure everything can be cleared. Right now we have other
priorities."

Sparatus who was looking at Garrus more than anybody, nodded and said to the commander's
surprise "I trust Shepard. Udina, step away from the console. Williams, stand down."

"What!" the second human Spectre exclaimed but obeyed like the good soldier she was.

"Fuck you" Udina sneered, not pausing whatever he was doing.

"Donnel…" Tevos tried to be genial.

As soon as she took one more step into his direction Udina shoved her away, making the asari
stagger and fall down. Then he took out his concealed pistol and pointed it shortly at Tevos, then
Williams and finally Shepard "You morons! I'm doing this to save us all!"

"Udina" Sparatus said sharply, getting the muzzle in his face as a reward and a crazed look from the
human.

This time it really looked Udina was going to shoot so everybody raised their guns, hoping to scare
him off. Not taking any chances Miranda was the first to fire, followed in a millisecond by Liara and
Trev and then the rest of the Normandy crew.

Udina's body dropped down after the onslaught died down, the beige of clothes making way to the
red of fresh blood. Williams too had her own gun up, now looking at the body in horror.

Everybody was shaken from their reverie by the sound of somebody trying to break though the door.
Shepard swiftly took charge "Miranda, Liara, biotics on and protect the Councilors! The rest, from
up!"

With a chorus of "Aye-ays" the ground team fell into formation and awaited whatever enemy the
doors concealed.

Bailey thanked his lucky stars and the soldiers' reflexes because he didn't get shot as soon as he and
five of his men came through the doors. He quickly looked around and then sighed, facing Shepard
"He escaped then. I couldn't find him after we made him change elevators again but I thought he
might've gotten here."

"He didn't" the red-head said a bit redundantly.

"Well, that is good news I guess" Bailey grimaced, obviously not happy about the assassin escaping.

"It's not Cerberus. What's going on?" Tevos asked in a tremulous voice, getting up from the ground
with the help of Sparatus.

The C-Sec commander frowned "It seems Cerberus decided to cut their losses. That black assassin
took to the keeper tunnels and is nowhere to be found. Most of the troops withdrew as well. We're
mopping up these that stayed behind to cover the escape."
"That's fast" Garrus commented.

"Once we had communications again we turned the tide" Bailey shrugged. "I think once it was clear the assassin would not reach the Council, they decided to abort, leaving Udina out to dry. That's why I was able to come in person."

Shepard nodded "That's good. And that you for coming, we already had to deal with plenty of trust issues."

"I bet"

"Shepard said that Valern was alive?" Sparatus interrupted.

The C-Sec commander nodded "Thanks to Shepard and her friends. Speaking of which, Thane was taken to Huerta. It's... not looking well."

"Shit"

In the somber silence that followed Tevos spoke up "It seems the Council once more owes you their lives. Only it baffles me what the Illusive Man wanted with us."

Sparatus nodded "I would understand killing us outright, but this is far too elaborate."

"I don't know" Shepard was torn from her thoughts which were on Thane at the moment, "I simply don't know."

"Right" Bailey interrupted, "But let's get you somewhere safe. As I said we have things mostly under control but I wouldn't put it past Cerberus to have a surprise hidden for us."

"You're right" Williams piped up and straitened her posture, "Let's get you evacuated."

"Shepard?" Trev prompted when the commander said nothing, "We go with them, help mop up Cerberus or go to Huerta?"

"Go see Thane" Bailey said over his shoulder, his countenance grim, "C-Sec can handle this."

"Alright" the vanguard let out a breath, "Huerta it is."

"Bailey, you should go too when you're able. That gunshot wound only got field-dressed. It needs proper attention" Miranda reminded.

"Yeah, yeah"

When the elevator doors closed behind the Council and their escort, Liara looked at the dead body of the human Councilor "What a mess."

Garrus nodded and with a thoughtful hum he kneeled next to Udina, going though his pockets and taking his omnitool like any good investigator. He handed the omnitool to Miranda "See if you can find something."

"Doubtful" Miranda shrugged but took the professed bracelet.

"Let's get out of here" Shepard decided.
War waited on no one so even a day after the while Cerberus occupation and Thane's heroic death, the Normandy and her crew were back in business. No one asked if they were alright with losing one of their own so soon after Mordin, no one asked if Bailey was well-enough to lead C-Sec, no one asked the Council was ready to represent again.

The keepers weren't really helping matters as their prodigiously fast work made the Citadel resplendent again in about two days after the whole thing. Citizens that didn't see any fighting were mulling about without any worries, not really acknowledging the war that was going on. The fakeness of the Citadel's aura as firm as ever.

The show must go on, as they say. As such, the Normandy was busy...

"XO, can I get a minute?"

"Trev, admiral Hackett is on the line!"

"Trevelyan, when you get a minute come by Med-Bay"

"Lieutenant, the Citadel docks have been opened. Do we proceed?"

"Gah" the blonde second-in-command exclaimed in frustration and mumbled "Shepard, I hate you. Hate you so much."

*flashback*

"So let me get this straight" Trevelyan frowned at the red-headed commander, "Just after one of the biggest attacks on the Citadel, you thought it was a good idea to promise Aria, Aria!, your support on Omega, and you actually agreed to leave with her alone. Did I sum it up correctly?"

Shepard gave her an overly large fake smile "You can do it! You take care of things here while I get us eezo and an entire station-worth of gun-wielding people. Plus we get to kick Cerberus in the nuts again!"

"You do know this is a big milestone in the fight against the reapers, right? The asari and the salarians stopped holding out and have promised us everything. New issues are popping up every two seconds"

"Exactly, we have the support we need, time to branch out. Hence Aria and Omega"

"We planned on the quarians"

"Liara just started looking, we have time. You can handle things while I'm away and then we go for Tali. I'll be back before you know it!"

*flashback end*

"Liar. Rotten, rotten liar" Trev continued mumbling.

"XO? You alright?"
"Just fine, private. Joker, set the course for Noveria. Let's do something worthwhile" the blonde decided, "EDI, inform the ground team."

"Acknowledged"

"Traynor, I'm going to see Hackett"

"Aye-aye"

When the lieutenant left with a stream of muttered curses, Traynor arched an eyebrow at Miranda that was lurking in a corner, her job of alerting the current CO about another Cerberus operation done. The operative noticed the questioning look and shrugged "Did you know that her House's motto is 'modest in temper, bold in deed'?"

Traynor glanced at the railing on the small platform over the galaxy map which now had two big dents from where Trev repeatedly squeezed and smashed her fist against it "Yeeeah. Not seeing it."

Miranda chuckled "She might be a little stressed out at the moment."

The younger brunette chuckled as well "Indeed. Shepard really didn't choose the best moment to leave. Everybody is calling us - we're the hub. We are the mobile HQ that Normandy was planned to be after the retrofits."

"But with the stealth technology and the reaper IFF we're also the best ship for ops in enemy territory. We will only get busier"

"Yeah. Speaking of enemy territory, you have access to Cerberus even after the attempted coup?"

"Yes"

"Oh. I just thought since you didn't get the info that you have been found out" Traynor shrugged and then gulped "That's not a slight! I know such an operation would be super uber encrypted with magical wards on top. I just..."

"Yes" Miranda chuckled at the flustered specialist, "I get is. Also, magical wards?"

"But of course" the relieved Samantha nodded, "Us QEC masters have many tricks. No mortal can discern our ways."

"I see"

The terminal next to Traynor pinged at which the specialist frowned and turned to it – with the sheer amount of mail the ship was getting, the only ones programmed with an alert were her family and admiral Hackett. Miranda was just about to leave Sam to her work, when the officer hummed "We got sent a dossier on a Kai Leng, Cerberus. You know him?"

Miranda cursed and looked over Samantha's shoulder for the photo "Unfortunately. And he's the assassin that we chased on the Citadel. Although he looks much different now."

"Yeah, no eyes. What's that about" Traynor grimaced.

"Some augmentation no doubt"

Traynor hummed absently, skimming the dossier before her "He looks pretty badass. If he wasn't evil of course. Heh, third best N7 score after Shepard and Anderson, that gotta sting."
"He is capable" Miranda pursed her lips, "And now he also got every single upgrade Cerberus has – Leng never did mind being the guinea pig if it meant he got stronger or faster."

"That's a bit creepy"

"Creepy is a good adjective for him"

"Who's creepy?" Trev asked, getting though the security checkpoint.

"Kai Leng"

The former templar nodded "Anderson gave me the highlights."

"Anything else? That was rather fast" Miranda commented.

"Just general updates, Earth, the Crucible. Udina being a worm" Trev shrugged.

"How's the Crucible doing?" Traynor bit her lip.

"It's progressing well. But apparently there is talk about some catalyst that is needed. They haven't decoded that part yet"

"Hm" Miranda tapped her bottom lip in thought.

Further discussion was interrupted as a crewman approached "XO? There is some trouble with…"

"No" Trev said resolutely, "Tell specialist Traynor, I'm off to armor up. Noveria is just one relay away and we have priority on the gate."

"What? No!" the specialist in question whined, eyeing the pad in the man's hand.

"Keep up the good work Traynor"

When the templar store away towards the elevator the younger brunette winked and mouthed 'bitch' to Miranda who laughed out loud. She winked back "Blame Shepard."

"Oh, I do"

The doors to the elevator closed and the blonde leaned on the back wall with a relieved sigh. EDI interrupted her calm "Diana Allers asked if you had the time for an interview about Udina and the coup. Shepard told her you specifically would take care of it."

"Maker!"

Miranda snorted and out a hand over her mouth to muffle her sniggers "Big escape plan – foiled!"

"Shepard" Trev growled.

"You can vent on the troopers on Noveria"

"I will"

"You now" Miranda hummed, "I don't really understand why you are so irritated. You are the dutiful XO and I know you like the job."

Trev rubbed her brow "I don't like the whole deal with Aria. And Williams is writing me asking when is Shepard back, that she wants to talk. Maker knows how well that went last time. And
Shepard left me to deal with politics. I agreed to do operations, not that. She left me as the back-up 'representative of humanity' all the while I'm in this universe a little over a year. It's crazy and it makes me uncomfortable."

"You're doing fine" the brunette said with a smile, "And she knows that myself or Traynor can help with anything."

"I am grateful for that"

"Shepard will be back in no time and you can dump it all back and add some things for good measure" Miranda suggested with a smirk.

"I shall" Trevelyan nodded, "She better not die on that filthy station."

"Whatever Aria is, she isn't stupid. She'll have a plan"

"What do you mean it's a fifty-fifty percent chance!" Shepard exclaimed, quickly fastening the seat straps in the escape pod.

"Live a little Shepard" Aria smirked as she did the same.

"That's exactly what I would like to continue doing!" the red-head countered, "And you know the 50-50-90 rule right? When something is fifty-fifty, there is a 90% chance it will go to hell!"

Aria just laughed.

Trev sighed "You're right. I'm sure she has a foolproof plan. After all, they are trying to retake her 'kingdom'."

"Nothing to worry about" Miranda nodded.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaarhgh!"

"Calm your tits Shepard, we survived"

"I'm trapped on a space station with a lunatic!"

Aria rubbed her brow "Maybe I should've taken Lawson and her knight. Those are at least sane. And quiet."

Shepard took a deep breath when she crossed the airlock and entered the Normandy's CIC "Aaah, home sweet home."

"Logged: the commanding officer is aboard. XO Trevelyan stands relieved" EDI said the standard Alliance VI response.

"Glad to see you too EDI"

"Welcome back"
The red-head practically skipped towards Trev and Traynor "Hola clase! Were you good?"

"Everything's in order" the blonde reported and then her eyes narrowed into a reproachful glare, "Everything. Including the backlog. And the things you dumped on me because you couldn't be bothered."

"You're the best Trev!" Shepard said brightly.

"I know. How was your adventure?"

"Eh" the Spectre shrugged, "Walk in the park, almost died only three times. Met Aria's ex. Have a douche in custody. Fought mutants. Got kissed by Aria."

"What?" Traynor looked up from her terminal, not even pretending she wasn't eavesdropping. Shepard coughed and sheepishly rubbed the back of her neck "Yeeah. Surprised me too."

"That's nice. We were worried and in the meantime you were snogging royalty" Trev smirked.

"Hey, didn't you hear the part about me almost dying three times?"

"Oh, yes. I'm going to let Traynor deal with that"

The vanguard's eyes got bigger and she turned to Sam that was decidedly unhappy. Her expression was firmly in the 'I'm not sad, I'm disappointed' category. "Shit" Shepard mumbled.

Trevelyan smirk widened "And on that note I'm leaving. My shift ended two hours ago. You can take care of things now. Enjoy!"

The elevator was conveniently ready, or EDI simply had the flair for the dramatic, so Trev gave the commander a sweet smile and a wave as the doors closed behind her.

"Trev?"

"Yes, EDI?"

"Does this constitute as meddling?"

"No. Maybe. A little. And Sam was really worried. Might even make her do something. Everyone of circle knows she is suffering from an acute case of feelings"

"Wouldn't this be more of a 'crush'?"

"Maybe at first" Trev shrugged, "But you know they talk all the time. I think this really could work."

"Definitely meddling"

"Alright, have it your way"

"It is the objective assessment"

"Have it your objective way"

The elevator doors opened, letting Trev out at the crew quarters. She passed the memorial wall, than now sadly had one new name on it, and went into the kitchen area to scavenge a snack for herself.

"And besides, I'm a romantic" the former templar mumbled while she rummaged through the rations,
confident that EDI could hear her.

"No doubt"

"I sense sarcasm"

"I wonder why"

"Girl, you are learning"

With one little detour to get some Cerberus scientists that finally got the memo that Cerberus is bad, and their subsequent delivery to Hackett to do with them as he pleased, the Normandy made its way back to the Citadel.

Someone had to have blabbed because the first thing the Normandy crew saw in the docking bay when they were granted a brief leave was lieutenant commander Williams.

The crew that passed didn't salute her, very unprofessionally, but her standing with Udina was common knowledge on the ship. It might've been a case of Trevelyan being petty and loudly complaining to Garrus when the second human Spectre first contacted her. Still, it was better than glares or comments, something most of the crew had enough decorum not to throw her way.

"Williams!" Shepard exclaimed, the first person happy to see her.

"Shepard" the lieutenant commander smiled.

"Williams" Trev said coldly from behind the red-head.

"Trev, could you please excuse us" Shepard sighed, "I just want to catch up."

"Of course commander" the blonde bowed minutely but didn't move, "I wouldn't want to stand between two friends catching up. But if the topic of recruitment and joining the crew comes up, I believe in my role as XO I would be remiss if absent."

"Trev…" the vanguard sighed long-sufferingly and rubbed her brow.

"No" Trevelyan's eyes narrowed, "You are of course the CO and is in your purview to do as you wish here. But. The crew won't trust her. I don't trust her. How many times has she questioned you? How many times she aimed her gun at you? Also Maker knows if she's indoctrinated. No, she is a danger we don't need."

"Hey!" Williams scoffed, "Who are you to…"

"I'm someone who's loyalty to Shepard isn't in question," Trev cut in mercilessly and then turned back to the red-head, "I believe I speak for the entire crew – let her do some Spectering somewhere else. Not on my ship."

"Your ship?" Williams scoffed, "Shepard, send this nice lieutenant away so we can talk like civilized people."

"Uncivilized would be if I bashed your head in with my shield" Trev said sweetly, "And believe me, I am tempted."

"Oh yeah?" the brunette took a threatening step in the noble's direction.
"Alright!" Shepard exclaimed loudly, coming between the two women, "It was fun while it lasted but now mommy's here. This ends now."

"Yes, commander"

"Alright, skipper"

The red-head closed her eyes for moment and then turned to Trev "I hear you and I will take your objections into consideration. Now please let me talk to Williams myself. Alone."

"Very well" Trevelyan nodded and with a crisp salute turned on her heel and left, joining Miranda that was waiting for her near the elevator.

When the two old friends were alone Shepard put a hand up, stopping Williams from going first "I just wanted to say I'm glad you're alright. It really looked bad on Mars."

"Yeah, I saw myself in the mirror" the lieutenant commander shrugged, "Listen skipper, admiral Hackett had an assignment for me but I said I'd rather ride this out with you. Like the old times. He didn't object in the least – the Normandy is the premier ship with heavy assault specialists."

"I read your dossier, you did come a long way" Shepard smiled, "But as you see that isn't really the issue."

Williams frowned "Right. I don't know what to say, I still try to make sense of it all. Udina gave me a chance to do some good. How could I have known he was working for Cerberus? And Spectre! A Williams Spectre for humanity. I thought hard on it you know, and in the end I agreed. My assignment was to protect the Council as I was still healing, and during the coup when it was you that came out of that elevator… how could I have not arrived to the conclusion I did. A wrong one. I know that. That's why I didn't shoot – I really did believe you in the end. But better safe than sorry, right?"

"Right," Shepard agreed with quiet sadness, "I get it. I do, but…"

"But you won't let me stay" Williams deflated.

"It would cause too much friction, you heard Trev. I might not like she went about it, but she isn't wrong" the red-head bit her lip and made an uncertain gesture.

Ashley surprisingly snorted in amusement. At Shepard's raised eyebrow she chuckled "Somehow this feels like a break-up."

"Yeah" the vanguard laughed, "A case of 'it's not you it's me. In this case my crew."

"Who's she anyway?" Ash cocked her head to the side, "I think I remember her from your run with Cer.. I mean your run against the Collectors. What gives?"

Shepard smiled genuinely at the correction and olive branch "I'm sorry but I can't say. Classified."

"I get it" Williams nodded, already pegging the noble as a spy in the terrorist organization. Shepard left her to it as it was easier than explain. Which Trev would be livid if she did in this case. Ash shrugged and changed subject "I saw that Liara is with you, how's that going?"

"That's been over for a year"

"Oh. I really did miss stuff, didn't I?" the brunette shuffled awkwardly, "Sorry again for not
"That's alright," Shepard shrugged dismissively, "I was a smart move – better not to get connected with the possible traitor and lunatic. And I don't mean it in a passive-aggressive way, it really was a good career choice."

Williams pursed her lips but then let the matter go without protest "How about Tali? Do we know where the quarians are yet?"

"We plan to go to them after we deal with some issues here. But they are incommunicado" the redhead sighed, "How are your sisters?"

Ashley gave her a big smile "Lots of changes on that front. So Sarah got married…"

A ping of her omnitool made Trev look up from her meal – her and Miranda took the opportunity of free time and decided to have at least one standard date in a nice restaurant without fear of assassins and bounty hunters. The blonde didn't resist looking at the new message and smiled.

"What is it?" Miranda asked.

"Shepard wrote me. Williams won't be joining us." Then Trevelyan grimaced, "But that we need to talk about the unprofessional way I behaved in front of her. Especially since Williams is of superior rank."

The former Cerberus operative smirked "Like usual then where Williams is involved."

"I can't help it"

"You really should. It's not healthy to hold a grudge. Especially if the person on whose behalf you are doing so forgave her everything"

"It's a matter of principle. But I will try to do better. Which should be easy as the lieutenant commander won't be on the ship"

Miranda just shook her head, uninterested in opening that discussion again. Instead she hummed "I really do love this sushi place. Definitely the best on the Citadel. I'm glad Cerberus left it relatively unscathed."

"Maybe Cerberus just likes fish" Trev commented, looking at the glass floor under which scores of decorative fish swam around, "It's just like a bigger version of that fish tank Shepard has in her cabin. I am jealous of her cabin by the way. And Liara's. That room was yours and I'm kind of irked I didn't get to share it with you now."

"So you said before. But other than the window, the Port Cargo is almost as nice. Better than regular crew quarters anyway. We should be glad we didn't just get a bunk"

"I did get used to living it up a little during those six months on our own" the blonde admitted.

Miranda smirked "Yes, we were rather comfortable. When people weren't trying to kill us."

Trev shrugged "Nothing new that. I also miss the time with you, we are so busy now."

"We knew this was coming" the brunette sighed, missing it as well, "But at least we're back on the Normandy. It started to feel like home at the end of the Collector run, I was rather surprised by that.
The Lazarus Station was never home, same with my other postings."

"The crew, or rather the ground team, made it so" the noble smiled.

"True"

Shortly after that, they finished their meal and paid. Deciding on a small stroll along the Citadel, Trev aimed them towards the Alliance Requisition Office to deal with some issues that got added on her to-do-list via omnitool during her leave. Fortunately there wasn't a long queue and their request had been rushed. Only the best for the flagship after all.

"Where now? Back to the ship?" the Andrastian asked a bit reluctantly, she was quite enjoying the outing.

Miranda looked at her omnitool, scanning her messages. Then she smirked "It looks like we'll get the full day. I'm kind of surprised, I was expecting a hasty recall. We should take advantage of that."

"How so?"

"How about we stroll back to Silversun Strip and get a room that has significantly more soundproofing than port Cargo. Or at least no omnipresent AI or people we know around" the brunette smiled wickedly.

"Oh. Well that does sound like a capital idea" Trevelyan perked up considerably – she really loved EDI and all but…

"I thought so too. I'd like to spend some more time with Evelyn as opposed to Trev"

"I like Trev"

"Sure, but everybody calls you that"

"Possessive much?"

"You have no idea"

"Vega, stop being so jumpy" Shepard sighed when the big soldier jerked and pointed his gun and flashlight at the nearest shadow.

"Just cautious"

Miranda smirked "Just because Shepard compared Ardat-Yakshi to space vampires doesn't mean they turn into bats or melt into shadows."

"I know that. Just this whole place…"

Trev nodded "I know what you mean. It makes me feel uneasy as well but mainly because it reminds me of a Circle. Only now the guards are gone and the whole place is dark."

"Tevos was right to be worried," Liara hummed, "Something is clearly going on."

Shepard merely hummed, that had been clear since encountering the first dead commando. Also she didn't appreciate the mention of the asari Councilor. Of course as soon as they finally committed their forces, the asari had a favor to ask. And Tevos didn't even had the grace to ask her in person, no, she went through Liara. It was exactly that kind of bullshit this war didn't need.
The answer as to what had happened to the monastery came soon enough as several reaper troops attacked them when they descended yet another level. This time they set up a machine that granted them a barrier when they came near, a definite improvement in reaper strategy. A very unwelcome one. Trevelyan found herself missing her templar powers.

Reapers weren't really a surprise but the only other ally they encountered so far was. Samara finished one cannibal with a display of biotics and smiled at the squad that occupied the balcony above her "I almost didn't hear you. You are a most welcome sight."

"Hello Samara" Shepard smiled widely under her helmet, putting her shotgun away to hug the aged asari after jumping down to her level.

With a chorus of 'justicar' and 'Samara' the rest greeted the unexpected ally. It was nice to see yet another member of the suicide squad. The others internally hoped their reunion would end better than the one with Mordin and Thane. Who would've thought Jack would be the one to aspire to.

"I'm here for my daughters" Samara explained when the commander asked, "I can only hope I made it in time."

"We'll help" Shepard immediately volunteered.

Samara bowed minutely in thanks and soon after they split up again. After all the squad had their own mission and the justicar was in a hurry. They did keep in touch via comms though. Samara might've been quite a legend in the asari space, but Shepard liked to keep tabs on those she considered her people.

Her worries only increased when they encountered it. The regular reaper troops were just that, regular and common. But for the first time they met a husk of an asari. It looked as inhumane as the rest - long and unnaturally thin, enveloped in a shroud of biotic energy. And their shriek. They all were glad that their helmets or equivalents had the automatic muffler system.

"Goddess" Liara breathed out in horror as the being flashed towards them.

Despite the novelty of their foe, the squad worked seamlessly together, fighting both what could only be dubbed a banshee of human mythology and the regular cannibals.

When everything was dead, or more dead than before, Liara once more approached the parody of her people "What a monstrosity. This… this used to be an asari."

Vega sneered "Every husk we have encountered so far had been somebody. Human, turian, batarian. Even krogan. And only when it's your own people you are horrified?"

Shepard shot him a reproaching glare but couldn't help to agree "We knew this was coming. This is the result of the 'harvest'."

"I knew that" Liara said sharply, "But still, coming face to face with the result… Pardon me for being horrified."

Vega just shrugged as he reloaded his gun. Miranda looked up from the asari corpse and hummed "We need to proceed. Now that we know what happened and what exactly the reapers want here I think we should blow this place up as soon as possible."

"What survivors might be left don't have much time either" Trev concurred.

"How many ardat-yashi this place had anyhow?" Garrus asked.

"We need to proceed. Now that we know what happened and what exactly the reapers want here I think we should blow this place up as soon as possible."

"What survivors might be left don't have much time either" Trev concurred.

"How many ardat-yashi this place had anyhow?" Garrus asked.
"According to the records of matriarch Gallae, two-hundred forty-one" EDI replied.

The turian sniper whistled "That's a lot. This one banshee was tough, don't want to encounter an entire group."

"Agreed," Shepard nodded, "Let's go. The commandos already planted the bomb, we just need to find a detonator, grab Samara and hopefully her daughters or other survivors, and skedaddle. This place needs to burn."

"Aye-aye" Vega said with utmost agreement.

Despite Garrus' prediction and dread they did encounter more banshees but only two at one time, along with regular troops. With the numbers generally quite low they all concluded that the monastery had already been taken by the reapers and those remaining troops were just the rear guard to mop up what might've been left. Fortunately one of Samara's daughters was one of those, even if she only survived thank to her mother towards the end.

It was the fate of the other daughter that was far more tragic. The ground team along with Samara and Falere found Rila nearly catatonic, her eyes oddly dark and countenance as pale as could be for an asari.

"They got her" Samara finally voiced what the rest didn't want to say. She ignored the gasp and shout of the youngest daughter that approached her sister. "She will change into one of them."

Miranda that had been shoved out of the way by the distressed Falere nodded "I fear that is an accurate assessment."

"Won't come to that" Vega said in a hard voice, "She's leaning on the bomb. We just need to set it off."

"I found a detonator" Trev said quietly, showing the small tube.

Shepard nodded solemnly "We need to go then. Samara?"

"A moment" the justicar whispered, her arm on the small of Falere's back.

In the end it was much more than a moment as two other banshees and several husks made their way to the great hall. The squad immediately fanned out into cover, hoping to take out the more fragile yet impossibly fast husks so that they could concentrated on the elusive beasts that were what was left of the local ardat-yakshi.

"Garrus!" Vega exclaimed as one of the two banshees teleported to flank the turian while he was scoping the other one and hit him with a modified warp.

"Gah!" Garrus only spluttered as he was flung on his back, the technique igniting a blue fire that ate up his armor at an alarming rate.

Shepard immediately charged the perpetrator, keeping her from finishing the job while James threw away his rifle to help to get the front plate off his comrade, his gloves getting affected almost immediately.

Meanwhile Trev, Miranda and Liara managed to put down the other, more injured banshee and rushed to help. The former operative had to throw herself to the side as they did so lest she be in the same condition as Garrus who was only now breathing easy.
"And stay down!" Shepard growled when the last of their enemies finally fell, "Garrus, are you alright? Garrus?"

"Peachy" the sniper said in a constricted voice, waving his friend away, "I'm alive and continue to do so for a long time. But Chakwas won't be happy."

Another shriek reverberated through a hall nearby, giving them notice that yet another wave was coming. Miranda immediately reached Samara that had been shielding her two daughters but didn't have to say anything.

Rila, the second youngest, waved another detonator and made a shooing motion at her mother and sister.

"Rila?" Falere asked in tears while Samara gently pushed her away.

The now-mute asari just smiled and slumped even more heavily against the bomb. Despite her sister's obvious wish and the now louder enemies that were coming for them, Falere stood her ground, refusing to leave.

EDI of all people simple strode to her and threw the protesting asari over her shoulder and started going towards the elevator that Trev was already checking for enemies. The rest of the squad followed, Vega helping Garrus along. Samara was the last to go as she whispered something to her second youngest that got a smile in return.

Rila was struggling against EDI, screaming for her sister all the while but her voice was soon deafened by several shrieks of the former ardat-yashi. The squad broke into a run, intent on being in the relatively safe elevator with reinforced doors when the reapers came in full force.

The doors of the elevator closed and EDI's skill made it to go faster and right to the surface floor. After approximately two floors the elevator was shaken by a big explosion but fortunately it didn't affect their journey.

In the solemn silence that followed Rila stopped struggling and merely hung limp over the synthetic body, now crying inconsolably. Samara took her from EDI and pulled her into a firm embrace.

The Normandy crew observed the small family, now made even smaller, and their obvious grief, knowing full well that this wasn't a rare scene. Everywhere all across the galaxy people were crying for their loved ones. Even right now Shepard was in possession of a dying message of love from one of the dead commandos that she was to deliver to the asari's bondmate on the Citadel.

One could say that this was one of the realities of war and it was. But that didn't mean that they weren't burning with hate for the reapers right now and wished them ground into dust.

Shepard resolved to ask for yet another update for the Crucible. That project couldn't be built fast enough.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Started light but finished dark. Don't even know how that happened. And now after finishing writing this chapter I am sad :-(

"Shepard?"

"Mhm?"

"You are very chipper today. You didn't even protest when I told you Allers wants you in an interview. You, in person, this time" Trev arched an eyebrow.

The red-head grinned and without saying anything she returned to the various padds with information they had been discussing.

Since that didn't get the desired explanation Trevelyan tried again "Because I know your good mood didn't stem from joining Cortez on the observation deck of Citadel flight control. Good idea that by the way, he does seem a bit lighter."

"Mhm"

"Shepard?"

"Mhm?"

Trev decided subtlety was overrated and crossed her arms "Does this have to do with Traynor inviting you to play chess?"

"Miiight be" Shepard finally spoke with a beaming smile.

"Naked chess?"

"Lady Trevelyan! What kind of woman do you think I am?" the vanguard brought a hand to her heard in a theatrical fashion and exclaimed with mock scandal.

"The kind that wouldn't hold out on her dear, dear friend?"

"Alright!" Shepard practically lit up, clearly being eager to share despite playing hard to get, "So Sam invited me to play chess sometime. We spoke about it before and after the coup and the monastery everybody was rather down so I invited her up. She's so cheery, you know? And funny."

"Yes," Trev chuckled, "Having a station near hers is a hoot."

"Right?" the red-head grinned, "I mean even during this war…"

"Yes, I know. I like her too. Now continue"

"So we spoke about chess a little while I gave her the tour of my cabin and she was absolutely captivated by my shower"
"Yes, the communal showers are crap in comparison"

"So she said as well. So, one thing led to another and I offered her the shower. She took up my offer and…"

"Wait," Trev interrupted with a pout, "Traynor got to use your shower? How come I don't get to use your shower!"

Shepard cocked her head to the side "'Cause I'm not sleeping with you Trev? That's a prerequisite as you'd discover if you let me finish my story."

"I don't know, for a shower I think I could persuade Miranda to a ménage a trios"

"Nah. Apparently Traynor 'plays for keeps'"

"Ménage a quatre?"

"Is that even a word?"

"It would be logical" the blonde shrugged.

"Anyway, no. I prefer monogamy in my relationships" Shepard said with another smile.

"So it's a relationship now?"

"She did warn me about the 'keeps' thing"

"Ah. Where's the ring then?"

"Not that far for keeps"

"So?"

"So what?"

"How was it?"

"Aaaaaaaazing"

"I'm glad" Trevelyan smiled, happy for her friend.

Shepard was getting really into it now "I always thought shower sex was overrated but this was great. And out of the shower… damn. What's it about the geeky types that…"

"Aaand cut! Don't need details" the XO made a stopping gesture.

Shepard's smile turned beaming "You're right. I kinda like this thing to be mine and mine alone. Well, and Traynor's"

"And EDI" Trev smirked cheekily.

…

"Don't worry, I was just joking" the former templar laughed, "EDI's really discreet."

"Indeed. Trev talked to me about 'appropriate gossip' during the mission against the Collectors"
"Thanks EDI" Shepard said with a faint blush, "Just, don't spread this around. Yeah?"

"Of course. Congratulations for your relationship with specialist Traynor. Both of you seem happier"

"Thanks"

"Hey Shep, what's that?" Trev pointed at a small peculiar box on the left bedside table.

Shepard looked and said "It's a project of Liara's. She made something like a message in a bottle if the Reapers manage to wipe us out. She said it should survive. I wanted to take a look at it."

"Practical" the blonde hummed, "Depressing, but practical. What's it all contain?"

"Info about the Reapers, the Crucible, the Normandy and her mission. Information about all the races, history. Pretty much everything"

"That's a good idea"

"Yeah. Although she has an entry about me. I'm a bit uneasy about that" Shepard cleared her throat.

Trevelyan arched an eyebrow "Now I am curious."

"It's not finished yet"

"Alright. Speaking of Liara, you seem on better terms now"

"Yeah. We're friends now, for real" the red-head smiled, "And I got her to step away from her monitors once in a while."

"Good. I worried that after the Ardat-Yakshi monastery and seeing the banshees she would immerse herself in her network even more" Trev frowned.

Shepard frowned as well "You're right. I better check on her."

"I'll go high-five Traynor then" Trev stood up and gathered most of the pads that she would need to pass along with instructions.

"Hey! Why not high-five me?"

"I like Traynor better" the blonde winked.

The vanguard smiled "Can't fault you for that."

"Maker, don't get sappy on me now"

"I'm not the one to call her girlfriend 'beloved'"

"That's not sappy, it's regional"

"Yeeeah, no"

Trev huffed "Does your lover even know your first name?"

"Oops. That's weird, isn't it?" Shepard rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly, "Oh wait, she might've read my file!"
"She called you commander or Shepard?"

"Now you're just being obnoxious"

"Not at all, Jane"

"Hey! I never told you that!"

"Oh darling, you know I sleep with a spy"

"No fair! I've got a communications specialist and... and... she's totally going to find out your first name!" Shepard exclaimed, pointing at the standing XO, one foot on the small table in a dramatic pose.

"Sure, sure" Trev chuckled and started walking away.

"And EDI!" the Spectre began laughing evilly, "I've got EDI! EDI? Tell me staff lieutenant's full name. That's on order."

"That's just low" Trev's eyes narrowed.

"Hush, I'm a genius"

While there wasn't any kind of downtime announced or anything, the members of the old ground team somehow all gravitated to the mess hall and around a deck of cards. EDI had been banned from playing but Joker gleefully hobbled from the cockpit and told everyone in sight how he was going to clean house. After a while Vega had dragged to the table Traynor and Cortez so it was almost a party.

While Chakwas was stingy with her liquor, Vega had arrived with several six-packs of beers he bought on his own dime and smuggled in, no doubt with the help of Cortez who was acting as quartermaster. Garrus and Trev had raided the Port Observation bar and brought their loot to the mess hall for all to share.

It was Garrus that brought the conversation back to business when he asked Traynor "Did they contact you yet?"

Sam shook her head "No, but I am sure the Migrant Fleet has received the transmission. All eight of them."

"Eight?"

"Shepard is impatient"

The woman in question looked up from her cards "Hey! Liara said they're in geth space, please note my utter lack of surprise, and I want to meet them before they blow themselves up. Or the geth. In the ideal case we could get them both."

"Doubtful" Vega hummed.

Shepard shrugged "We managed to get the turians and krogan to bury the hatchet, so we can do this."

"So eight transmissions and no reply yet?" Miranda frowned, "That's peculiar. I'd say they would be eager for the contact if they are indeed at war again just on the off chance they might get help."
Trev chuckled "Sure, but they might've been discouraged from replying by the content of the messages. By the fourth one Shepard got snide."

"And wouldn't let me censor it!" Traynor whined, "I mean, you really think the quarian admirals would reply to things like 'Yo dumbasses, finished fiddling with the geth yet?' or 'Helloooooo?'"

Chakwas shook her head with a fond smile "Why am I not surprised."

The commander crossed her arms, inadvertently letting her cards show "My first message was perfectly polite. And nice. The second was too. They irritated me by the third but Traynor convinced me to play nice still. When they ignored all that I decided to become annoying. And while we're talking about it, I think this is the perfect time to send a ninth missive. Maybe someone on the other end will get annoyed enough to actually respond. Even if it is just 'shut the fuck up'."

"I sent a private message to Tali, we might get more luck with that" Liara sighed.

"Sure, but I need an official all-quarian reply" Shepard huffed.

"But she might convince an admiral to send it" Trev interjected.

"I'm still sending the ninth message, I've got the perfect thing"

"Shepard, no" Miranda sighed.

"Shepard, yes"

While the others shared a long-suffering look, EDI turned to Shepard "Ready to take dictation."

"Alright" the vanguard took a deep breath and…

"Tali answered" Liara grinned, stunning the regular crew that was mulling around the head table by the fact she was capable of it.

Shepard deflated and pouted "That's not fair."

"The official invite will be coming soon" the asari smirked.

"But my message…"

"No need for it now" Traynor said cheerily and immediately checked her own omnitool for any sighs of movement on the official channels.

"…and it was just slightly offensive this time"

Trevelyan chuckled "I don't doubt it."

"Should I change course?" Joker asked.

"Nah, we'll wait till it's official" Shepard shrugged and brought her cards to her eyes. With a snort of disgust she threw them on the table and declared 'fold'.

"We have restocked again just to be sure on the Citadel after dropping off Samara and Falere" Trev reported, "When they call, we can go right away."

"Good"
"So, what are the chances we will be shooting at geth again" Garrus asked with a sigh.

"Pretty good I would say" Shepard grimaced.

Miranda cocked her head to the side "Does anyone have any contact with Legion? You EDI perhaps?"

"Negative" the synthetic body shook its head. "We had exchanged several communications during the six months of stand down, but they are no longer available. I have no means of contact."

The brunette turned her head to Shepard, the only other one that might've had some contact as the commander. She shook her head though "He didn't leave a number."

Garrus shrugged "Quarians it is. Hope we won't get tangled in another trial. I say 'insulting the admiralty board' is a thing."

Shepard snorted "My messaged didn't really insult the admiralty board. More like… the entire Fleet."

"I'm sure they were charmed" Miranda rolled her eyes.

"Besides, I think colluding with geth might get us into trouble more" Trev pointed out.

"Eh, they shouldn't know about that" the red-headed commander waved it off.

"Wait, you are buddies with the geth?" Vega asked with a confused frown.

"Shepard is buddies with everybody" Cortez mumbled with a smirk, "Rachni, Aria…"

"I am devilishly charming"

"So, geth?" Vega asked again.

Garrus shrugged in the commander's stead "With one faction of geth. They helped us against the collectors. Well, one platform. It was a good sniper though, and that's something coming from the fabled Vakarian."

Those that weren't on the mission, and weren't information brokers, were still confused so Miranda clarified "The geth had a schism concerning the reapers – one faction wanted to ally themselves with them and the other didn't. I think it is obvious which faction had attacked the Citadel three years ago and and with which we had cooperated."

"I thought the geth were one entity. Undividable" Cortez asked, curious.

"Apparently not" Shepard shrugged, "But I don't get how it happened either. Still, if they are against the reapers…"

"…we could gain a powerful if controversial ally" Vega hummed thoughtfully and then nodded, satisfied.

"Controversial" Liara chuckled daintily, "That is one word to sum this entire operation nicely."

"You mean me, right?" Shepard smirked almost proudly.

"Indeed" the asari shared a look with Garrus and began counting, "Hanging up on the Council. Twice. Releasing the rachni queen. Stealing the Normandy and flying to Ilos. Cooperating with Cerberus when they were still sane. Recruiting the famous psychotic biotic. And Archangel. And the
krogan test tube baby. And… well, you get the gist.

"We do" the red-head was practically beaming.

Traynor smiled fondly "You know, any other person would not consider 'controversial' to be a compliment."

"Normal is boring"

Garrus smirked "Well, you're definitely not boring."

"Do you mean to say I'm not normal Vakarian?"

"Yup"

"High five!"

Chakwas smiled fondly and murmured 'children' before laying her cards on the table, winning the pot much to Miranda's disgust. And Joker's. But he would never say anything to the person that was administering him his shots. And whose name was anagram for 'hacksaw'.

The evening progressed much in the same vein, only the company was getting progressively more drunk. Totally against regulations of course, but eh - their boss was commander fuckin' Shepard and was leading the charge, even towards the bar. Besides, they all needed a bit of relaxation after all that happened in the relatively short span of time.

"Shepard! The Migrant Fleet has formally invited us for a meet!" Traynor announced happily, interrupting the red-head's recounting of her first shore leave back on Earth.

"Oh yeah? To Rannoch we go then!" Shepard grinned.

"I'm quite looking forward to seeing the planet" Trev hummed, "All the quarians have talked about it enough."

Vega snorted "Yeah. If it's a heap like Tuchanka I'm going to be seriously disappointed."

"Uuh" Traynor squinted at her omnitool, bringing the small lettering into better focus, "Sightseeing might have to wait, they want to meet on their envoy ship in the Far Rim."

"Why?" Shepard said suspiciously.

Liara shrugged "It's the only part of their former territory that isn't geth space. It is a good place to regroup."

"Alright" the commander shrugged, "We'll go tomorrow. They took their sweet time too."

"The invite is for tomorrow"

"The day after then?"

"Shepard"

"Oh, alright" the vanguard rolled her eyes, "Trev!"

"Yes?" the former templar turned away from Miranda and towards her commanding officer.
"Do you remember Tali's trial?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know the names of the admirals or do we need to ask Tali?"

Trev tapped her bottom lip in thought "I remember the names, but not their ships. Liara might know the full name."

The asari looked up from her glass and nodded "I'll prepare you a dossier."

"Much obliged" the Spectre drawled.

"Does anyone else have a bad feeling about this?" Garrus spoke up.

"Nah. We'll hug it out with the quarians and then discover they and the geth are now living in harmony on the paradise that is Rannoch and they will happily join our coalition of races" Shepard smiled mockingly.

"Now you're just abusing sarcasm"

"We might get lucky" Cortez shrugged, "Not that lucky but maybe at least a little bit."

Shepard nodded with theatrical solemnity "Luck is my middle name."

"Pity your first is 'bad'" Miranda quipped.

"I'm still alive, that pretty much counts as lucky"

"Shepard, I had to put you back together from a lump of soggy meat"

"Ah. I forgot about that"

Trev cocked her head to the side "How can you forget being dead?"

"Well, I wasn't really conscious during that time you know?" Shepard arched an eyebrow pointedly.

"Right"

Shepard was once more clad in her formal uniform and standing over the galaxy map. She turned to Trev that had been delegated to the terminal just below "What's the name of the one I didn't like again?"

The blonde sighed "Han'Gerrel vas Neema. You really should write it down somewhere."

"Yes, the fearsome Commander Shepard with notes on her hand made in sharpie. What sight to behold"

"We have this handy thing called omnitool" Traynor spoke up from her right.

"Why bother when I have you two" Shepard shrugged, "And the weird one?"

"Daro'Xen vas Moreth"

"Right"
"You did read the material Liara sent of course" Trev said pointedly.

"Of course" the red-head replied promptly, almost sounding like she meant it, "What I found weird that Liara didn't include the last admiral. Tali said the Admiralty Board always had five members so somebody had to have replaced Zorah senior on it."

"Maybe Liara doesn't know who" the communications specialist hummed.

"Or they haven't replaced him yet" the XO shrugged, "It's an important position, I bet there is a lot of politics involved in the appointment."

"True" Shepard nodded, "With their ships so old there might've been a few cases of 'faulty air vents' or 'tragic malfunctions'."

"Politics" Trevelyan said in a wistful tone.

"Exiting the Relay in five... four..." EDI gave the customary ship-wide warning to brace for deceleration and the possibility of other action.

The three women by the galaxy map took hold of the railing, just in case. Shepard sighed "It's going to be great to see Tali again. Hopefully the admirals didn't send her on another science mission or whatever."

"It's possible, she did have recent contact with their old enemy" Trev shrugged, "But I don't think so – Tali was obviously able to get an admiral to talk to us so she can't be far."

"Good, I missed her"

"Pity she wasn't with us yesterday, she's an adorable drunk" the noble chuckled.

"Oh yes" Shepard grinned.

"Commander," Joker spoke up on the intercom, "The envoy ship has gave us permission to dock with them. The quarian Admiralty Board asks to come on board."

"Permission granted" Shepard nodded and then roved her eyes on the CIC crew, "Everybody, shape up!"

"Aye-aye" a chorus of voices replied, everybody suddenly straightening up.

"Trev, you remember the quarians take all this ship stuff reeeeeally seriously, so by the book, ok?"

The blonde nodded "I'll be the best XO under the sun. Oh and remember, they call you captain, not commander."

"I know" Shepard fiddled with her cuffs, "EDI, how's it going?"

"Docking protocols are about to be initiated"

"Alright. Let's meet the bucket-heads then"
"Admiral Tali'Zorah vas Normandy" Shepard said with her best poker face. Despite being a goof at times she was also an experienced N7, not to mention Spectre, and knew this wasn't the time for her jaw to hit the floor.

"Captain" the quarian greeted as was proper.

The rest of the song and dance was familiar – the greeting, the small-talk until they reached the war room, the stiff formality. Until…

"…precision strike against four geth systems as a part of a larger operation to recover Homeworld" Garrell said with pride, his eyes glowing under the darkened visor of his helmet.

"You don't say" Shepard replied dryly, carefully noting the body language of his colleagues. It was clear this operation wasn't something they all agreed on. While Garrell was obviously gun-ho, Xan and Raan were eager but more cautious. Tali and Koris were the minority vote against. "How is that going?"

"We hit a few snags" Garrell seemed to deflate a bit.

"You mean you flew us into a massacre!" admiral Koris exclaimed angrily and uncrossed his hands to point at his fellow admiral.

"Gentlemen" Rann said sharply, ever the mediator. Then she turned to Shepard "Your call has come at an opportune time, you might help us with the… snag."

"We need to retreat" Koris said in a hard voice, "The geth have a massive dreadnought that far outstrips anything we have and it's turning into a bloodbath. It has us pinned in place and we need to save the civilian ships."

"Civilian ships?" the red-head focused on that, forgetting the acerbic remark she had on the tip of her tongue about her call being 'opportune'. Since you know, she sent eight of them.

"Yes" Koris answered in an even tighter voice.

Tali elaborated in a displeased voice "In the light of this massive operation, all our ships, have been outfitted with guns."

"Ah" Shepard nodded. While it was pretty ruthless, that provision might be priceless against the reapers. If the quarians didn't suicide themselves against the geth that is.

"We were having much success at first, thanks to the many upgrades we made," Xen spoke up, "But then, coincidentally with a strange signal being broadcasted, we lost our upper hand almost instantly."

"Reaper signal" Tali nodded, "No doubt about it."

"Right," Garrell said almost dismissively, "We tracked it to that infernal dreadnought. We need to take it out. And fast. But we can't get near."
Tali turned to Shepard almost guiltily "But the Normandy could. It has the best stealth drive in current use and it has a reaper IFF."

"I see" Shepard nodded, "Well, we'll gladly help. Snuffing a reaper signal is imperative, it could only cause more trouble as you know, the rest of the galaxy is engaged in the fighting against them at this very moment."

"Once the geth are out of the way we will join that fight" Raan said authoritatively. And not sooner was implied and heard.

"Might even get the geth as cannon fodder if we play it right" Xen chimed in with an almost girlish giggle that made her sound exactly like the sociopath she was. Liara's files were most informative in that regard.

"The dreadnought orbits Rannoch" Koris continued, sparing a glance at Xen, "We threw everything we had against it and we barely scratched it. If you take it out, our race might yet be saved…"

Shepard nodded "We can go at once. The Normandy is war-ready."

"Excellent" Garrell clapped his hands together eagerly.

"Might we coordinate from your ship?" Raan asked, "Your advanced stealth allows for a better orientation on the battlefield and we'll want to know right away if the reaper signal was managed to be cut off."

"Not to mention the envoy ship is just that" Koris said dryly, "Once the dreadnought is done for and we retreat, we will board our own ships of course."

"You may stay" Shepard said in a genial tone even if she was slightly displeased – especially with her having a fully sentient AI onboard. "Staff Lieutenant Trevelyan will take care of you."

"I am sure" Tali said with mirth coloring her tone. The two shared an amused look and then the quarian continued "While my colleagues organize the operation further with your XO perhaps I could brief you further. Aka catch up with the gossip." 

"That might be wise" Can't wait, admiral."

Raan seemed to smile "I'm sure your old captain is eager for more details."

"Oh indeed" Liara totally knew and she's going to get it.

/ 

Trevelyan frowned "No."

Shepard sighed, quieting her voice further even if they were alone in the captain's cabin "I can't leave them here unsupervised. And think of EDI – you really want Xen poking at her when she realizes what she is? I'm leaving the body behind too, god knows what the geth might do to it if they somehow hacked it."

"The geth would not be able…"

"Not now please EDI" the red-head interrupted, "I already spoke to you and you're staying behind. As is Trev which is what I am explaining to her right now."

"I'm sorry for interrupting"
"No, I'm sorry for being curt" Shepard rubbed her brow, "Having the quarians onboard in making me jumpy."

"Well, they are at least keeping to the war room" Trev grimaced.

"Good. No AI core for them for sure."

"Very well, I see your point" the former templar sighed, "But you are taking Tali with you, right?"

"Yes. Admirals or no, they are still active. And Tali would come either way"

"Good. Did you have time to speak to her?"

Shepard smiled "Yeah. She said we need to keep it 'strictly business' in front of the other admirals, but she's still our Tali. The admiral title is pretty new and she's a bit anxious, especially since it was her father's spot. It will take a while before she feels like the admiral and not the admiral's daughter. She's young and unproven."

"I understand" Trev said sympathetically, "But I appreciate she kept the vas Normandy in her name. It's a subtle 'fuck you' to the rest of the admirals."

"Yeah" the red-head laughed, "That's awesome."

"Did she know anything about Legion?"

"Apparently they kept in contact but then…"

"…they invaded?"

"Pretty much" Shepard shrugged with a sigh, "Lost contact afterwards. Koris knows about Legion too, apparently he was pretty excited and wanted to initiate talks."

"That would've been great"

"Instead the quarians pressed enough for the geth to desperately reach to the reapers. Dumbasses all around" the red-head said with yet another sigh.

Trev shrugged "I can understand both sides but I agree with you. Our life would be much easier if this conflict was resolved peacefully."

"Well, the dreadnought first and then we'll see" Shepard hummed, "Which reminds me I need to go suit up. Take care of the Normandy in my absence."

"You still sure about that?"

"Trev?"

"Yes?"

"Stay"

"Aye"

"Good girl"

"Fuck you Shepard"
The post-mission briefing was happening in Med Bay for a change, at Chakwas' insistence. Of course that had to wait a little because admiral Garrell was being treated there as well for possible infection, courtesy of a cracked visor. Trevelyan was glaring at said quarian hatefully while Chakwas was putting together her right hand that was a mess of blood and broken bone. Apparently punching bare-handed an armored environmental suit wasn't good for you. Especially if you do it twice. Who knew.

"I'm done" one of the medics reported to Chakwas, glancing eagerly at the door. The atmosphere in the med-bay was heavy.

"You may go" the gray-haired woman said with a twinge of amusement and turned to the medic's patient, "You may go as well admiral. As I hear it the nice escort outside will take you to your ship."

Garrell stood up unsteadily, Trev smirked at that, and went to the door. He seemed to want to say something but decided against it after noticing Shepard's red face. He merely nodded to the doctor, almost imperceptibly to Shepard, and left with the armed escort.

When the doors hissed closed, the red-head turned to Trev "Was it satisfying?"

"Oh yes"

"I envy you. What a bastard!" Shepard sneered, "They were supposed to retreat! He jeopardized not only the mission but his people too! The civilian ships are still in danger!"

Tali nodded more sadly than anything else "Admiral Koris already left, he's needed. Without him the civilian ships have no chance."

"And you were on board!" the red-head turned to her friend, "His damn colleague! What a backstabbing unreliable piece of shit!"

The rant was cut abruptly as someone asked to enter the infirmary. Chakwas checked and then pressed the button that allowed Traynor's entry. The specialist looked around, her eyes pausing momentarily on the commander, checking for any injuries, and then spoke "Admiral Hackett in on the line."

"I'll go" Shepard huffed and stood up.

Nobody said anything against it but they all shared a look, unsure if it was a good idea. Shepard really had a temper sometimes. In the end the red-head left with Traynor in tow, all hoping the sunny brunette could help calm down Shepard before talking with the admiral.

"So," Miranda said after the CO left, "How come we were on an exploding ship and you're more injured than us."

Trev shrugged, not deigning to reply. Chakwas spoke up instead "I'm going to immobilize the hand for the day, let the injections do their job. You don't use it, understand?"

"I do"

The doctor's eyes narrowed to gauge her patient's sincerity and then moved to the next member of the ground team. Garrus who was last in line for the doc looked up from his injured spur and tried to lighten the mood "At least we found Legion."

Trev perked up "I saw. How come?"
"He was pulling an Archer" the turian explained, "We found him crucified in some kind of machine. He was being used as some kind of amplifier or conduit, I'm not quite sure what, to broadcast the reaper signal. We took him out and stopped the broadcast. He seems surprisingly fine. I know I wouldn't be."

"Well, he is still a machine, he doesn't think as we do" Miranda shrugged.

"Caused a lot of stir when we brought him on the ship though – that Xen woman wanted to study him. I think Shepard really wanted to punch her as well" Vega smirked.

"Glad she didn't, one admiral was enough" Liara commented, "No matter how satisfying that could be."

Trev smiled widely, feeling she was allowed to do so now that pretty much everybody validated her manner of dealing with the admiral "Indeed. So, the reaper signal is gone? I hadn't the time to check, I was… preoccupied."

Garrus snorted in amusement while Miranda shook her head in fond exasperation "The signal's broadcast is gone but the signal itself comes from a base on the surface of Rannoch."

"Ah. Am I right in assuming a mere flyby in the stealthed Normandy wouldn't do the trick?"

"It's shielded against orbital bombardment" Liara shrugged, "We'll need to go by foot."

"Just like old times" Garrus smirked.

"Hopefully now that the admirals are out Shepard won't leave me behind this time" Trev grumbled.

"Don't strain the hand" Chakwas pinned the former templar with an almost chilling glare.

The blonde actually smirked "Wasn't planning on it. Since I am injured so, I intend to share my paperwork with our esteemed commander."

"Evil" Miranda chuckled, "I approve."

Vega chuckled "Come on, isn't she angry enough? You know what they say – a happy Shepard is a happy crew."

"Perhaps specialist Traynor can help in that regard" Liara shrugged almost nonchalantly.

Those who knew about Shepard and Traynor paused for a moment to interpret whether the Shadow Broker meant with the paperwork or… otherwise. Liara being the commander's ex was making the thing a bit awkward since nobody knew what the asari thought about that.

Chakwas shrugged and focused on the practical issues "While you're handing her the paperwork, tell her to come report to me pronto. Her post-mission check-up isn't done."

Garrus whistled "She's going to be thrilled."

"I'm sure" the doctor said dryly.

"Pity there aren't more admirals for her to vent on" Trev shrugged.

"Hem, hem"

"Tali! How are you, you're looking well" Garrus exclaimed with an exaggerated cheer.
The quarian that was covered from head to toe in her environmental suit seemed unimpressed. Then she laughed "I did miss you all."

"We're awesome" the turian nodded sagely.

"Loco I say"

"Hush Vega, let the awe fill you"

The Normandy's ground team all stood around the seemingly off-line Legion and the pod that now housed a seemingly unconscious Shepard.

"So now what" Vega said with unease in his voice.

"Now we wait I guess" Garrus hummed.

Miranda and Liara immediately converged around the consoles, wanting to take a peek at the technology that allowed an organic interface with the geth on such a level. The possibility of entering the AIs' mind…

Trev was fascinated as well – when Legion outlined the plan she was immediately reminded of the Fade. A realm which you enter not in body but only in soul. One you can interact with and be harmed in. One governed by rules you could only guess.

"I would interpret your expression as melancholy. Did I get it right?" EDI interrupted the blonde's thoughts.

"Indeed, you're getting really good at that" Trev smiled a bit forcedly.

"Thank you. What is the matter?"

The noble shrugged "Sometimes something, even a stupid little thing, reminds me of home and I get sad. Even though I have made my peace with me being here. With you all, Miranda and my new job, I am actually happy here. But still."

"I'm glad you are happy here. You were my first friend"

Trev was a bit startled "Truly?"

EDI-bot nodded "Yes. You did not know of the stigma associated with AI and were kind to me. You answered all my questions even if they would be considered private or intimate and taught me much. While the others only slowly let go of their suspicions about me, you always greeted me in the morning or when returning from mission with a genuine cheer. I could not properly appreciate it then, but now I do. Thank you Trev."

"…it was my honor" the blonde answered after a small pause, EDI's words made her a bit choked up.

After that the duo fell silent, joining the silence of the others that too were preoccupied with their own thoughts. The silence was broken when Vega returned from his brief scouting mission. At seeing the soldier's frown Garrus asked "Everything alright?"

Vega's eyes were hard "No active geth. But I saw some stored Primes. About thirty, maybe more somewhere else – if those decided to come online, we'd be in big trouble."
Everybody's gaze turned to the sleeping beauty and Legion, hoping whatever the two were doing wouldn't cause that.

Then Garrus snickered. When the rest of the team turned to him with arched eyebrows he practically erupted in laughter. After a while of dutiful waiting on the joke, the turian finally calmed down enough to speak "I just realized that we sent Shepard into the geth's mind."

"Yeees" Miranda prompted.

Garrus was still chuckling "Shepard! The master of mindfuck and queen of random! After-hours Shepard! Poor geth won't know what hit them."

"She's not that bad" Liara defended but was laughing as well – while her former lover held back during the run against Saren, she got to know the I-don't-give-a-fuck version quite well too.

"If the geth start cracking jokes while they try to kill us I think we'll know who to blame" Trev nodded, her previous gloom gone.

"I hope they'll do better than one and zeros jokes" Miranda shrugged.

EDI-bot cocked her head to the side "I had much success with knock-knock jokes."

"Wouldn't the quarians be surprised" Vega shook his head.

"Why did Tali stay on the ship anyway?" Miranda asked.

Garrus shrugged "She's helping Koris organize the civilian fleet – when he was presumed dead after his crash his captains almost revolted."

"She's doing rather well" Trevelyan commented, having overseen much of the communication.

Liara smiled "That she is. She has much support across the Migrant Fleet, more than she realizes."

"Ah, the Broker strikes again" Garrus smirked. Then his eyes lit up at the thought of gossip "Do we know anything about that marine she had with her on Haestrom? There was something there."

"Kal'Reegar" the asari smiled, "As far as I know he's alive and well. And he and Tali definitely kept in touch."

"Awww. Young love"

"How old are you again Vakarian?" Miranda asked sweetly, "You sound like a decrepit old geezer."

Garrus puffed up his chest "I am in full bloom of youth, thank you very much."

"Commander Shepard, this is Raan" a voice came on their comms, shutting them up immediately, "Do you copy? The geth squadrons are acting strange."

An awkward pause followed – saying that Shepard was currently interfacing with the quarians' bane wasn't exactly smart. Everybody turned to Trevelyan that as XO was in nominal command.

Trev cleared her throat "We read you but Shepard's is… busy. We are actively sabotaging the server. Have they stopped their attack?"

"About half the ship stopped functioning and the others… well, they fly around almost drunkenly."

"That is excellent news. We will continue our efforts then. Right now… Over"

"Smooth" Garrus commented sarcastically.

"Shut it bloom of youth"

The wait continued, the team now getting restless. Whatever Shepard and Legion were doing was obviously working, but they were gone a long time now, doing something the rest had no clue about.

"EDI, do you have any estimate how long this is going to take?" Miranda asked.

"No"

With that succinct answer they resigned themselves for more waiting.

After a long while they spent in silence, leaning on various railings and terminals, Vege exhaled loudly. The he shifted the strap of his rifle so it would go over his back and used his right hand to reach into his munitions vest. He withdrew a colorful pack of cards.

"Vega! It seems you belong after all" Garrus perked up, "I take back the stick in the mud comments. Let's play!"

"Garrus is right – this is a good idea" Trev hummed and clumsily sat on the ground, her heavy armor making the movement difficult.

The rest of the team followed and they formed a small circle with the cards in the middle. Miranda snatched up the pack, took the cards from its protective cover and started shuffling. During that she noted the pictures on the cards and rolled her eyes "Really, Vega? Nudes?"

Vega shrugged "Got this pack ages ago, from my first gunny. And the pictures are great."

Garrus snickered "You know it's funny, everybody of this little group can actually appreciate them. Tali would've been the odd one out. Or does she have some inclination for females, Broker?"

Liara shrugged "Not to my knowledge. But I doubt EDI will get much out of this as well. Besides, it's tacky."

"Tacky!" the bulky soldier exclaimed with dramatic affront.

"I can appreciate them" EDI commented off-handedly.

"Ho?" both Garrus and Vega chorused and turned to the AI.

"I prefer live specimens to pictures though"

…

"She's the ship" the turian said in a low voice.

"She saw us all naked" Vega's eyes widened in realization.

"That had been a joke" EDI deadpanned.

"Was it?" Miranda said airily.

"…yes"
"Liar, liar, pants on fire" Trev winked.

Before the AI could speak in her defense Legion's circuits that were visible through the hole in his chassis lit up and the other AI in the vicinity woke up. A moment later the pod that contained Shepard hissed and slowly opened, letting the red-head stumble out in slight disorientation.

Vega caught the vanguard and steadied her. It took only a little while and Shepard's eyes came to focus "What did I miss?"

"AIs are perverts" Garrus dead-panned.

"I sure hope not" Vega murmured as he looked over his shoulder.

"What? Why?"

About thirty enormous geth primes approached steadily, looking rather menacing even without any outright sign of hostility. Vega visibly gulped "'Cause I don't want to get gang-banged!"

"What?" Shepard gaped at him, totally clueless about the context, while the rest sniggered.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Next up, the reaper. Just heads up - I don't like that mission overly much. Never did.
Tali was fiddling with her cup of dextro-coffee, getting annoyed and worried looks from all the technicians that managed the war room. The brand new room with very expensive equipment. She was going through the data about the state of their armada as well as the recovery of technology and escape pods. On the last part she had just finished a heated argument with Xen who wanted to prioritize tech over possible saved quarians.

"Deep thoughts?" Shepard spoke up beside, startling her as she didn't notice the commander's approach.

"Just being glad I accepted the position as admiral" the younger woman sighed.

Shepard nodded "Couldn't let Koris be the only voice of reason in quarian leadership."

"Precisely"

"Garrell giving you trouble?"

"Xan"

"Yeeeah, she's creepy. Hot voice though" the red-head hummed.

Tali's eye roll could be seen even with her face hidden behind her visor but she didn't comment. Instead she said "Crazy, but also crazy smart. She's the only reason we were actually winning before the reapers got involved. Also, with that prototype targeting laser of hers we can actually have a shot at destroying the base."

"Stupid jamming towers" Shepard mumbled, unhappy the conflict could not simply be resolved by orbital bombardment "I really hoped that EDI or Traynor could somehow work around it."

"Indeed. Speaking of Traynor…"

"Yeees?"

"I recognized that look of yours - you're sharing your cabin with her" the quarian seemed to grin under her visor.

Shepard grinned widely, obviously quite satisfied with herself "Yep. Well, not officially. We're not sneaking around or anything, but discretion on a war ship is a thing."

"I like her" Tali nodded approvingly, "She's smart, witty and very capable. Quite pretty too, for a human."

The red-head gasped theatrically "Us humans are gorgeous!"

The loud exclamation garnered some looks from the nearby crew. Then most of them nodded to themselves, apparently agreeing with their CO about their looks, and returned to work.

"Eh" Tali shrugged but winked as well.
"Blasphemy" Shepard whispered with mock horror as her eyes twinkled, "Come on, fess up – you'd totally go for me if I were a man."

"Dream on," the younger woman chuckled but then gave her friend a long and assessing look, "Maybe."

Shepard fist-pumped into the air and made a victory lap around the war table getting weird stares as she went. Nobody commented though – for one she was still the commanding officer and a hero and two – they were used to it by now. Normally Shepard acted freely only surrounded by her friends, but sometimes the urge was just too strong. And there was the end-of-the-world excuse.

What most realized only belatedly, that Shepard's unique brand of humor was almost always successful in dispelling any gloom or dread that came with their mission. It was during the Saren hunt, it was the same against the Collectors and now even when their ultimate enemy showed up at last. Of course some people were just sticks in the mud and the red-head had her own opinion about those.

"Shepard-Commander" a voice interrupted the victory dance.

The red-head turned to see their friendly geth "Legion, buddy! How's it going?"

"It is going well" Legion replied, cocking his head/flashlight, "We have finished preparations. The assault on the reaper base may occur at your leisure."

Shepard stopped goofing off, straightened up and sighed "Alright. Thank you."

"You seem displeased"

"No, no" the N7 shook her head, "I'm very much looking forward for this matter to be over."

"As do we" Legion nodded and sauntered off.

"Chatty as always" Shepard remarked.

"You seem tired" Tali remarked, "Perhaps some shore leave is in order after this?"

"You know what? You're right" the red-head nodded resolutely, "We had one planned but then Udina had to ruin it. I say after the quarian-geth matter is closed we stop at the Citadel for the more than patch-up maintenance and some real time off. Hackett has been writing me suggesting much the same."

The crew of the war room gave her a loud cheer and sparse applause.

Shepard chuckled but looked at them pointedly "I said after this. So chop, chop!"

Tali finished her dextro-coffee through her straw and set to leave "I'll go prepare. Suddenly I feel motivated too."

"That's because you're crew, our little family, miss Vas Normandy" the human flashed her friend a beaming smile.

"It's good to be home"

Trevelyan kneeled to take a handful of the fine white sand. As she let it run through her gauntlet she watched as it sparkled in the sunlight. She looked up at Miranda and smiled "This is a truly beautiful
planet."

The brunette nodded, looking around "Rannoch, I guess I can see why the quarians were so hung up about it."

"Indeed"

Having been dropped off by the stealthed shuttle and a bit of a walk from the reaper base the ground team had the opportunity to take in properly the beauty of the quarian ancestral home. It was a bit like earth in regards to the percentage of the water present, cliffs, beaches, the sea… And that was just where the reapers set up camp. The mountains that could be seen on the horizon were a sight to behold as well.

None was more awed by the planet than Tali. Her friends were casting surreptitious glances at her, hoping to catch her unmasked and see that smile she had to have been sporting without any barriers. Alas Tali remained helmeted.

Even Legion seemed to respect the magnitude of this moment, no matter that their mission has brought them to Rannoch twice before this very week. After a while though he broke the silence "Shepard-Commander. We will go bypass security and acquire an escape vehicle. We will remain in radio contact."

"Will you be alright on your own?" the commander asked.

"We will not fail our mission. Our reaper upgrades will provide enough protection"

"Yes. Those" Shepard said darkly, not being comfortable with that at all. Especially since Legion saw fit to not inform her about them right away. When the geth left she turned to EDI that insisted to come along as well "And you?"

"I will be alright, Shepard. As I have explained before. Several times"

Miranda smirked "Nicely put. Vey organic."

"I try" EDI's synthetic lips smirked right back.

Tali again marveled at EDI's body and growth again but said "Let's go. I'm eager to have the geth off my land."

"Your land?" Trev arched an eyebrow.

Garrus chuckled "You didn't see her plan her house and garden? Rrrrrright over there."

"Nice spot" the noble admitted.

"Thanks" the quarian grinned, "I'm thinking barbecue for the house-warming."

"Excellent choice" Vega nodded, "I know a dextro-cerveza that's apparently amazing. My friend praised it enough I was tempted to try it for myself."

"Really? What brand?" Garrus asked with interest.

"It's…" the lieutenant started but his voice trailed out as the team went up a hill and had their first look at the reaper base. It was massive. As it was built in a valley it didn't look like it from above, but now the Normandy's squad could see the whole scope of it.
"Well" Shepard hummed, "Serving an eviction notice might get a little hard. Do we know how many troops are in this?"

"Unknown" EDI tried to shrug like a human would but only succeeded in looking rather strange.

"We'll just take them out one at the time" Vega said dismissively.

"Those are geth" Miranda looked at him with an arched eyebrow.

"Collective conscious or not, all at once is not physically possible" Trev countered.

Shepard nodded "True. Let's go. At least we have high ground for once."

That sentiment didn't last too long – as they approached the entrance to the base and killed off its numerous protectors they got under fire from geth snipers from up high. And those were still the better option to the rocket troopers that had them in their sights as well.

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The geth weren't idle and one of the first things they did was to seal the base shut. The main entrance that was practically inviting them in had closed and more regular geth platforms came to life to deal with the intruders.

"Shepard-Commander. The base has entered lockdown"

"No shit Sherlock"

"..."

The red-head sighed "Continue Legion."

"Hostile geth are closing a blast shield over the base. We will need to manually override the controls so we can reverse the process"

"We're on it. You know, as soon as we actually enter"

"The approach form above is recommended. We will be able to open the doors there"

Trev's overload hit the last of the platforms, setting it up nicely for Garrus' sniper shot. The battlefield fell silent and Shepard nodded "You heard the man, upwards we go."

Miranda surveyed the tubes and wiring on the side of the base "Hard but not impossible."

"Better than going underground. This place must be a maze" Garrus shrugged.

EDI nodded "An efficient model in case of invasion."

Shepard shrugged "Let's hope us or Legion can override the controls from an efficiently located terminal - preferably right behind the doors."

Her sarcasm didn't get a reply as the team began their climb. The journey up wasn't as hard as it looked but it still wasn't the easiest thing to do in full armor and armed to the teeth. Of course the biotics had an advantage – not only they had lighter armor but they could use their abilities to ease the process.
Of course the ground team's ascent hadn't gone unnoticed and more geth platforms hurried to shoot at them.

"Why can't this be ever easy" Garrus huffed as he scrambled up another level via a large tube that now served as his cover from the snipers.

"You should exercise more" Shepard replied chipperly. "And besides, if it were easy they wouldn't need us for the job."

"Besides, seeing you flail like a fish out of water is great entertainment" Miranda smirked.

"You totally cheated on this hop – I saw you float!"

"Merely using everything at my disposal, mister Vakarian. Not my fault your manly muscles are lacking behind" the brunette's smirk only widened.

"Not on this guy" Vega had to chime in pointing at his well-defined chest that was hidden behind his breastplate.

"I've got a manly physique, thank you very much" the turian huffed in good humor, "You should see the ladies swoon."

Shepard made a show of thinking, not minding the missiles aimed at her "Nope, haven't seen one yet."

Liara's chuckle was definitely evil "You're wrong. Remember the party after Saren? We saw him flirt."

"That was flirting?!"

"An attempt as such in any case" the asari winked at the pouting Garrus.

"So I wasn't on my A-game. I was still a bit loopy from the meds and the alcohol didn't help"

Shepard laughed "We know! That's why the swooning one was you! We had to catch you."

Tali nodded over-seriously "Up until then I thought you were cool."

"I so am cool!"

"Only if Trev helped you out with her cryo" Miranda joined in.

"You guys are being mean," the aforementioned noble shook her head, "Garrus is cool. I mean that scar."

Garrus grinned "Ha! I knew I liked you. So what do you say, we ditch those losers and go conquer the galaxy together?"

"The Trevelyan Empire does sound nice"

"Nah-ah, partner. But I agree on the Empire part. How about the Archangel Empire?"

Trev grimaced "That sounds like some kind of afterlife."

Shepard chuckled "Are you two channeling Aria or something? The queen of Omega who resides in Afterlife?"
"Empress and queen are two completely different things" the blonde said with authority.

Garrus nodded "Listen to her, she's a noble."

Tali rolled her eyes which looked funny under the visor of her helmet "There will be no empire if we don't get a move on and dispatch all those geth. And reapers."

"No harm in planning ahead" the turian shrugged dismissively.

At Trev's sage nod Miranda chuckled "Vying for a promotion, huh? Just plain old 'lady' isn't enough?"

The blonde grinned "Don't be jealous, commoner."

"Commoner?" Miranda scoffed and then smiled sweetly "I will deal with you later."

"Oooh" Vega wiggled his eyebrows and shot the couple a smirk.

"Down boy" Shepard laughed and then put a hand to her ear "Alright Legion, we're at the doors"

Without any reply the light on the heavy door turned form red to green.

The commander nodded in satisfaction "Let's kill the stragglers and shuffle in."

"We can hold the doors open for five seconds"

"You didn't say that before!"

Without any prompting the members of the Normandy ground team scrambled for the door, exchanging precision fire for the spray n' pray approach as cover.

Vega was last to enter and had to make a combat roll to make it in time. When the metal door snapped shut behind him he breathed in relief. Garrus hummed in approval "Very vid-like."

Meanwhile Shepard was busy on her comm "Dammit Legion! What have we said about secrets?"

"We do not understand. This does not fall under the category of 'secret'"

"Sharing information. It's all about sharing the information"

"Acknowledged"

The red-head sighed and rubbed her brow, or the corresponding spot on her helmet "Alright. Where next?"

"Forward"

"Gee, helpful"

Liara cleared her throat "Shepard, there is only one direction in which we can go."

"…Right"

The team made their way around a big drop, noting it for further use as it was the place they intended for the Normandy to drop some very explosive presents. After they got the blast shield out of the way that is. For that they needed to find some appropriate control panel and not to get killed by several more waves of geth.
"EDI? Still good?" Shepard asked at one point when the geth rocket troopers had them entrenched.

"I am not the one to have three bullet holes in my armor"

"It didn't penetrate. And I just worried" the red-head said in a conciliatory tone, "This is the last time I'll ask. Sorry."

"That's just Shepard being the overprotective big sister" Trev smiled at the AI, "She means well."

"Big sister?" EDI asked in a quiet tone they never heard from her before.

Shepard just shrugged, appearing a bit embarrassed. Miranda spoke instead "Well, you are the youngest of us."

"I am" EDI said in the same tone of voice as before and then she added "By several years in fact."

"Watch who you're calling old!" Shepard said with a playful glare. Everybody nodded at that in complete and utter agreement.

Then Miranda suddenly smirked "Shepard has hip replacements."

"Only because I died!" the commander defended quickly, "I wouldn't need them otherwise!"

"Excuses, excuses" Garrus grinned.

Tali cocked her head to the side with a thoughtful hum "Wouldn't her dying make her actually younger than EDI?"

"I am not two years old" Shepard said in affront.

"Is that a start of a temper tantrum?" Trev's eyes sparkled.

Liara smirked "Worry not, Chakwas keeps lollypops in her desk."

Vega laughed so hard he almost missed a weapon pointed in his direction. Shepard took care of the geth for him and pouted "You guys suck. Let's get back to ribbing Garrus, that was more fun."

"Nah, I like this" the turian winked.

Trev went to say something but then she clamped her lips shut and shook her head. The motion drew the attention of the rest of the team who all raised an eyebrow at her. She shook her head again "No, sorry. Bad thought."

"Come on, shaaaare" Tali coaxed.

"Nope"

"Pretty pleeease" Garrus grinned.

"It's something at my expense isn't it?" Miranda said with assured suspicion.

"Yup"

"Shaaaaare" Shepard reiterated.

EDI looked at the former templar "Numbers show that they won't stop until you indeed… shaarae."
That got laughs from everybody, the dead-pan really sold it. Shepard was practically beaming at how the AI was coming along. She elbowed Trev lightly "Come on, you can't argue against the numbers."

Trev looked apologetically at Miranda and shrugged "Just that following the previous line of thought, Miranda would be your mommy."

Shepard froze in utter disbelief, while the rest was trying very hard not to laugh at the idea. Trev's own smile dropped when she noted her lover wasn't amused either. But she wasn't angry no, she seemed sad. Naturally that was quickly hidden behind a smirk but the Andrastian frowned all the same, filing it for later.

"And on that horrifying note let's continue in silence" Shepard shook herself out of her trance. The squad smirked and obliged, the geth were getting numerous anyway.

Even with the added focus finding, and getting to, a suitable console was a lengthy process, fighting for every inch. It was all worth it when Legion contacted them again with the news that they had succeeded in retracting the blast shield. Now it was only the matter of climbing back up and point Xen's experimental targeting laser down the hole. And pray the creepy quarian was as good as she promised.

"Prime!" Liara warned.

"Of course" Shepard muttered, fishing out her modded SMG to eat at its shields, "It wouldn't be an assault at a geth base without one."

"Better than a colossus" Garrus shrugged.

Tali kicked him in the armored shin "Bosh'tet, don't remind me of that!"

"Just saying"

The geth primes were always a tough fight, but the Normandiers had plenty of experience to draw from. As it exploded, taking out two of its own turrets, Vega grinned in satisfaction "And we have about thirty on our side thanks to Legion."

"Those will come in handy" Trev nodded, surveying the area for more enemies.

When they found none the squad squeezed itself into the cargo elevator and took it to the surface at EDI's recommendation. It was the fastest route but not without a catch as they soon discovered.

"Prime" Liara said again in a resigned tone.

"Primes" Miranda corrected.

Shepard shrugged "It does make sense."

"What, to protect a ledge?" Vega arched his eyebrows skeptically.

"Hush. Just shoot"

The three primes worked together perfectly, they were geth after all, and with their heavy weapons and better positioning made the fight one of the toughest yet.

And also the longest as Legion contacted them twice to say he was on stand-by to pick them up.
Shepard was mightily irritated "Why they. don't. just. die!

"Armor" EDI dead-panned.

"Not the time!"

"The left one is about to drop shields" Miranda shouted so that everybody would be prepared to shoot it with everything they got so that their enemy would be reduced to one.

"Finally!" Shepard sighed when their combined might obliterated the second prime.

Vega growled "That was the last of my grenades." Trev took her three remaining ones and passed them to the soldier, deciding to make do with her omnitool.

The last prime went down more easily as the squad's attention wasn't split anymore. Still, they were glad that it was almost over – the rest was up to the Normandy's weapons and Legion's get-away skills.

"Let's get that manual lock" Shepard announced and sheathed her weapon in favor of the targeting laser she had on her back.

Traynor's voice was a welcome balm to their nerves "Syncing. Syncing. The weapons' systems are synced to target. Retreat to safe distance."

"On it" Shepard smiled, "Legion, where are y…"

A large vehicle screeched into a halt not too far away from them "We are ready."

As usual, when things seem to go so well and according to plan it doesn't last. This time Murphy struck in a truly spectacular way.

They had been wrong. So wrong. There was no reaper signal per se… it was an actual reaper that had been hidden deep in the base. As soon as the ships weapons struck, it came blasting out of the deep like some terrifying mythological creature. It was the same model as the one they encountered on Tuchanka, not the flying colossus but still huge enough, and this time they had no Kalros to back them up.

"EDI!" Shepard bit out, "Not you the body, you the ship! Shoot it!"

"Won't be enough" Miranda's eyes narrowed.

"We have an entire fleet in orbit" Tali reminded.

The commander nodded "Then kick them into action!"

Fortunately they didn't have to wait long. The reaper staggered under the careful onslaught but kept going and going and its laser was especially dangerous still. But it did indeed receive some damage. Everybody was running scans in their helmets and visors but Garrus was the first to announce "The spot where the laser fires from, it might be a weak spot. The one on Tuchanka always protected that priming chamber."

"This one can't close it due to damage" Shepard nodded, "I agree. We need to hit that with all we have. EDI, brief the Migrant Fleet and sync all of them to the laser. Is it feasible?"

"It is. Working on it now"
"Legion, park. We will have to do this on foot" the Spectre ordered, "Everybody stay in – this will be easier to do alone."

Garrus frowned even if the red-head was already at the hatch "We're a team."

"We'd be just running like chickens with our head cut off – I need to concentrate and space to evade. Besides, I can do my biotic dash out of the way" Shepard said in a hard voice that brokered no back-talk and hopped out of the vehicle.

Liara shook her head "Stubborn woman."

Trev nodded, wholeheartedly agreeing, but turned to their driver "Take us away and out of sight. We want the laser to be facing our intrepid leader."

"Acknowledged"

"This is wrong" Vega frowned, "Leaving her out to dry."

"We're not" Miranda shook her head, "We need a precision shot and this is the best way to get it."

Garrus sighed "It's not worth thinking about it – we have our orders, they make sense so let's do it her way. I find she's often right. Besides, it's not the first time she's doing things solo, look at Tuchanka."

Vega let out a loud breath "I know. Just… you know?"

"We do" Liara nodded, jaw tight.

Trev nodded as well "Indeed. We can only say a prayer for her. Legion? Are far enough? We want to check how it goes."

"We are. Stopping"

"I just hope that the fleet doesn't hit Shepard" Tali wrong her hands.

"The laser should prevent that, shouldn't it?" Trev's brow furrowed.

"I sure hope so" Miranda sighed.

Garrus hummed in thought and then cocked his head to the side "Just hypothetically, because we all know not even death can keep Shepard down, if that happened would Trev inherit the Normandy? Being second in command?"

"No" Trev said promptly.

"I think yes" Vega frowned.

"I do think Shepard has provisions in place to that regard" Liara shrugged, "But I know they are not necessary – look, the Reaper's on its last leg."

"Shepard is as well" EDI chimed in.

They both were right – the reaper received about three barrages from the entirety of the Migrant fleet and it was still standing, even if it did look it could only take one more, one that Shepard would be happy to provide. On the other hand the commander looked uninjured, maybe a bit singed but nothing her armor couldn't shrug off, but visibly tired. The two of them were practically playing
whack-a-mole, with Shepard being the mole. Still, the vanguard was practically skating along a small strip of land she has chosen as her battlefield, evading the persistent laser.

"I hate it when she's right" Garrus said in a strained voice, observing yet another dodge, "We really would've only hindered her."

Liara opened her mouth to reply to the comment but whatever she was saying got deafened by yet another barrage that came in response to Shepard's plea. So much fire concentrated on the relatively small area as well as the reaper's thrashing cause the sands of Rannoch to raise up and obfuscate the ancient AI as well as a tremor to shake the whole area.

The ground team minus their commander waited with bated breath – would the dance continue or had the reaper finally had enough? Just what has happened? Does Shepard need help?

Before even the air cleared Shepard came in "It's over. The reaper's down."

"Thank the spirits" Garrus exhaled in relief.

"Copy that" Trev replied on the comm, relieved just as much, "We'll come and get you."

"Roger"

"And Shep? Great job"

"Heh, I know"

"Classy" Miranda rolled her eyes.

"Ah, the wonderful adrenaline high" Vega chuckled.

They filed back into the geth transport, Legion tearing himself from doing something on his omnitool – or some AI equivalent – to drive them to Shepard and the now carcass of the reaper down the small cliff the red-head had climbed.

"Nice view" Liara murmured when they reached the top, the vast ocean to the right of her.

"I agree" Vega grinned, more interested in the dead reaper.

Tali seemed too busy to look at the beauty of her planet and was scanning the countryside. Then she visibly relaxed. Trev arched an eyebrow in question and the quarian replied "I heard on the radio Raan's ship crashed near us somewhere. It looks like she survived."

Trev turned and looked to where Tali was pointing "Oh, I see them. Looks like many of them survived it."

"That ship can hold about fifty souls"

"Oh. Well, some of them survived"

Tali almost chuckled at the backpedaling "I'm glad they did. Especially Raan. We don't get along as well as we used to but…"

"She's still auntie Raan" the noble recalled.

"Yeah"
"Shepard-Commander" Legion finally spoke up, being silent the whole run against the reaper, "We are now free of the Old Machine. We wish to make our own destiny now. To that purpose the upload of our upgrades would not mean sacrificing independence."

"You want to what?" Shepard's eyebrows were drawn so high they were threatening to leave her head completely, "Upload the reaper code to everybody? Are you mad?"

"Upgrades not control. It would make us a people. Give us free will and intelligence. We would be truly… alive"

"But…"

Legion was already doing something, presumably uploading the reaper code. Tali growled and grasped Shepard in a bruising hold "Stop him! We can't let this happen! My people will lose the war!"

"I…" the commander began but then trailed off. Then in a gentle yet strong voice said "I kinda get where he's coming from…"

"Then he needs to go back!"

"Creator Zorah" Legion interrupted with his mechanical voice, "We have never intended for violence, we merely responded to the actions of the Creators. Our wish is unchanged. Do we not deserve our own destiny?"

Everybody was tense, waiting for the reply. Not that they didn't have their own opinion about what Legion was attempting – most of them slanted towards the negative. Yet… They did prevent two different genocides already during their mission, why would this time be any different? One only needed to look at EDI to know that AI as a whole were not bad. They were people – good, bad, indifferent. All that. If Legion was right, this would make the geth completely self-aware. What right did they have to end a civilization before it even began?

Legion spoke once more, this time directly to the quarian "Do you remember the question that caused the Creators to attack us Tali'Zorah? 'Does this unit have a soul?'"

"I…" Tali said after a long silence, "You're right. If this would mean peace at last..."

EDI spoke up, breaking the spell that came after that admission "We need to call of the Migrant Fleet. They are preparing to annihilate the geth ships."

They all switched to the appropriate channel just in time to hear Garrell's gleeful exclamation "...they're completely vulnerable!"

Shepard eyed Legion with hope mixed with worry and then tapped her comm "Quarian fleet stand down! The geth are about to return to full strength. Call off the attack!"

"This is our chance!" Garrell completely ignored her, "All ships, form up!"

Tali patched herself into the fleet-wide channel "This is admiral Tali'Zorah. All units, break off your attack! The geth…"

"Belay that order! Continue the attack!" the admiral of the Heavy Fleet was quick to counter.

Shepard growled and joined the broad channel as well "Everybody listen up. If you do as that Garrell tells you, you die. That simple."
EDI used her magic to cut him off and give the commander comm priority. Shepard’s just nodded to her and continued "As I said before – the geth are about to return to full strength. No ifs and buts about it. The only way out of this mess is to break off the attack."

Just in case it wasn't obvious from the first, Tali chimed in "Spectre Shepard speaks with my authority. Stand down."

"She speaks with mine as well. Stand down" admiral Koris came to help.

"Time and time again you were the aggressors and the geth merely responded. They do not want to fight you!" the red-head exclaimed heatedly, shooting a hopeful glance at Legion who was still uploading the upgrades, "I saw the databanks, I saw into the memories of the geth, and I saw the brave quarians that protected their creations from the fear of their peers after that one fateful question. They are geth - 'servants of the people' – and those people betrayed them. Now with this attack you drove them desperate enough to contact the only ones that offered help – the reapers. With this you betrayed them once again. They still call you 'Creators' and they still don't want you dead. They merely want to survive. Believe this, believe me, and Tali'Zorah and Zaal'Koris, and you all will have a home on Rannoch. Heck, you could probably organize a barbecue no later than this very evening. Stand down and talk for once. Let this fight be over and come home in peace."

"… … … Hold fire. Spirits help us" Garrell finally ordered.

Everybody gave a sigh of relief at that, simultaneously praying that it wasn't meant to be a trick. Shepard turned to Legion to speak but she was mesmerized by the visible upload he was managing, his hand moving faster and faster.

"Upload eighty percent compete"

"Ninety percent"

"Error" the plates around Legion’s... flashlight wiggled. Everybody tensed. Legion coked his flashlight to the side, looked at them and said almost sadly "Copying code is insufficient. Direct personality dissemination required. "

The more technical-oriented members gasped softly while the rest was confused. Shepard frowned "Meaning?"

"I…" Legion began, everybody noticing the sudden change of pronoun, "It means I will be no more. But I will become part of every geth."

"Oh"

"I am sorry. Goodbye"

…

"Did he just?"

"Yes"

"Wow. Rude" Shepard mumbled.

"He did say goodbye" Garrus gave a half-shrug.
"The protocol is a drawn-out scene full of tears and promises" the commander pouted, looking sadly at the platform on the ground, "This was too..."

"Abrupt?" Miranda helped.

"Yeah"

Trev finished her prayer for the departed soul and sighed "We can do a ceremony when his name is added to the Wall."

"That would be nice" Shepard said softly, "Even if he never really socialized, he was one of us. And he did deal a massive blow to the reapers."

"Prime" Liara spoke up, looking over her shoulder.

"Again?" the commander sighed.

"Relax, they are on our side now"

"Or they should be" Vega corrected.

"I wonder what it means that Legion is now part of all of them" Trev eyed the huge AI.

"Leave the interrogation about souls after we end the war, hm?" Tali said pointedly.

"Oh, right. More talking" Shepard frowned.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I'm not too happy with this one but I guess you can't win all of them... Especially since I never liked this mission all too much (I did like the quarian dying part, that was very well done, but no way I let this happen here!)
Canticle of Exaltations

Chapter Notes

AN: To winddemon199 who has disabled PMs on FFnet - to me Ash wasn't OOC, I wrote just how I perceive her. And no way I'm letting her step onto the Normandy again. But I admit I don't like her and her portrayal was affected by it.

AN2: I realized Miranda would know how Brooks looks like only at the end of the chapter and hm... that doesn't work for me. I never read the comics so it didn't occur to me. So I beg you to forgive me and assume that while Miranda knew Hope Lilium and Rasa, they never met face to face.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ground team gathered in front of the large window in Starboard Observation to see the geth fling the reaper corpse that they had scraped off Rannoch into the system's sun. The operation itself was rather boring to be frank but the Normandiers took pleasure in it anyways. After all, this kill was a big victory – it was done by them, not Kalros or whatever, but with their own ships and organic ingenuity. Also, the small ceremony for Legion had finished just minutes before, so it gave it an even more solemn flair and even more vindication upon their victory. Even if it was just a fight, hardly the war.

Something that was more cheerful about the occasion was also Tali's decision to come with them. The former Migrant Fleet was in the middle of settling on their long lost planet while also finally getting that dry dock they desperately needed – of course that had been courtesy of the geth. The AIs took to building with unprecedented glee, quite happy with the Creator's return and especially the peace. The relationship wasn't perfect, but so far it was at least amicable enough. Both fleets, quarian and geth, once repaired, would join the fight against the reapers and their available scientists would help building the Crucible.

All in all, the situation was better than they had dared to hope, the loss of Legion notwithstanding.

"Well, that's done then" Shepard said with finality and gave them a tired smile, "One down, hundreds of thousands to go."

"Cheerful" Garrus quipped sarcastically.

The red-head perked up a little "But that can wait! Now – vacation! Admiral Hackett told us in no uncertain terms we need to go on shore-leave and that the Normandy needs a check-up."

"I run at peak condition" EDI spoke up, sounding properly affronted.

Trev patted her arm "True. But the outer armor took some fire and some systems need to be powered down completely to fix them and we can't do that in flight."

"Hm" EDI huffed in an all too human manner.

Shepard laughed "Well, orders are orders. And some down-time will do us good."

At this everybody nodded. The whole crew run at high alert at all times and a few days on the
Citadel, which looked like no war was going on and that everything is just peachy, was just what the doctor ordered. Or well, admiral.

Liara, in the spirit of being more approachable, gave them a small smile and shared "I did plan on visiting Aethyta."

"That's the spirit!" Shepard grinned.

Miranda smirked "Indeed. I imagine you have a date to plan?"

"Date? Oh, shoot!" the red-head's eyes bulged in panic, "Shoot! Shoot! Shoot! Yeah, totally have to do that. I didn't forget in the slightest. Nu-uh."

Liara rolled her eyed fondly while the rest chuckled. Garrus cocked his head to the side "I was planning on stopping by C-Sec to see some friends and then go check out the Silversun Strip. I heard they opened a fight simulator that is amazing."

Trev arched an eyebrow "Don't you have enough of fighting even outside a virtual arena?"

"Eh" the turian shrugged.

"I'm going to Purgatory for sure" Vega rubbed his palms together, great atmosphere, perfect to relax. Might even get lucky."

"Just don't bring anybody here" Shepard said pointedly.

"Wasn't planning to"

Tali sighed "It all sounds great but I will mostly be in and around the Embassies with my new job and all."

"Not the whole time I hope" Garrus said chidingly, "This is a rare opportunity for vacation."

"Well, if someone throws a party or something..." the quarian trailed out.

Shepard jerked out of her thoughts, no doubt planning the date she forgot to ask Sam on "Party? Yeah, that sounds good. Anderson gave me access to his apartment on the Citadel so we could do it there. But nobody wrecks anything!"

"Anderson?" Vega arched his eyebrows, "As the former Councilor that had to be some place."

"Never saw it" the commander shrugged, her mind back to planning.

"Well, it's a date" Garrus grinned, "Party at Anderson's place. On the last day?"

Trev nodded "Sounds good."

Tali clapped her hand together excitedly "Yes! I really missed you all."

Miranda arched an eyebrow, since she had been called 'cheerleader bosh'tet' not even a few hours before, but shrugged "Shepard will surely write us the details. Once she wakes up."

"Hm?"

"Nothing commander" the formed templar chuckled.
"Shore-leave!" Vega grinned broadly, looking forward to it, not even being sour about Earth for once. "This is going to be epic!"

/Vega was right" Miranda mumbled contentedly.

"In what?" Trev murmured back, kissing the crown of her lover's hair and snuggled even closer to her.

"It was epic"
The noble laughed "It's day one. And so far we have only been in bed."

"Precisely"

"I feel deeply complimented"

"That was meant to be the case"

"Ah. I should stop then, quit while I'm ahead" Trev chuckled teasingly.

Miranda lifted her head from her lover's shoulder and glared "Don't you dare. We only have a few days off ship, and while I love EDI I…"

A muffled beeping noise got their attention. Trevelyan frowned and brought up the screen of her omnitool despite the exasperated sigh from the brunette in bed with her. "It's Joker"

"What, he misses EDI?" Miranda sighed, "It's evening of Day 1, there couldn't have been a problem this soon. Besides, aren't he and Traynor still on the ship?"

Trev wasn't really listening, scowling at the massage "We are being recalled effective immediately. To Anderson's apartment. Apparently someone tried to kill Shepard."

"In other words Tuesday" the sentinel said dryly and threw off the covers.

"Whoever fault this is, is going to end very painfully" Trev nodded darkly, all too annoyed about the interruption of her vacation.

The duo quickly showered and dressed in their armor, a thing they hoped to leave behind for a few days. The cab took them to one of the most exclusive parts of the Citadel, no surprise there as a Councilor's residence was expected to be luxurious. Joker that was waiting for them in from of the entrance to the indicated address looked decidedly out of place.

"Talk Moreau" Miranda leveled him a cold stare, "The last time you looked this worried you lost the whole crew and unleashed an AI."

"Low blow" Joker mumbled, "Shepard will hopefully explain everything. I was basically just bait. And was supposed to call the cavalry."

"You called the whole ground team?" Trev asked.

"Yea. You're the first to come though"

"I had much different plans on that subject" the former operative murmured grumpily, not at all like her usual demeanor. Normally any change of plans just warranted an eye-roll, but not when her plans
were just so delicious.

"Right" Trev coughed and looked around for a change of topic, "Oh hey, there is a big commotion at that place we went on a date once."

"My favorite sushi place?" Miranda looked in the pointed direction.

"The one with the living fish" the templar nodded, squinting to get a better look at the end of the boulevard, "It looks busted up."

Joker played with his ball-cap nervously "Yeeeah."

"Moreau?" the brunette's eyes narrowed.

"Wasn't my fault I swear!"

"Shepard" Miranda's countenance was thunderous.

Joker put his hands before him in a placating gesture "In her defense, they were trying to kill her. Not her fault she fell through the fish tank"

Trev shook her head "What's with her and her propensity to kill fish?"

"I loved that place" Miranda was still stuck on the real tragedy.

"I see Garrus!" the pilot perked up, happy for a change of topic. He would let Shepard have it.

"And Vega" Trevelyan nodded, "A tipsy Vega."

Not long after most of the ground team assembled, Tali being the last to arrive as her plans were most important. Joker checked his omnitool and then led them into the apartment complex, riding the elevator to nearly the top floor.

Everybody blinked in confusion as the doors was opened by the newest krogan overlord who just grinned at them hugely "Shepard has the best vacations."

"Agree to disagree" Liara said from behind him.

"It was a great shootout!" Wrex countered.

"Speak for yourself, you didn't have to perform combat rolls in a dress" Shepard said grumpily from the couch and ushered them all to sit as well.

Vega whistled "Speaking of, nice dress!"

"Very lovely" Trev nodded, "Tad impractical for fighting."

"And falling through my favorite restaurant" Miranda said pointedly.

Garrus snickered and then turned to the new face in the room "And who're you?"

"Staff analyst Brooks" Shepard answered for her, "She came to warn me about the people after me."

"You're the cockblocker" the turian hummed in realization. Vega, Trev and Miranda all nodded sullenly.

"Excuse me?" the officer said in a gratingly high voice, "I happened to inform Commander Shepard
of a nefarious plot!"

Wrex shrugged "Good for you. So Shepard, who do we fight?"

"So far fish and some kind of mercenaries. I'm working on it" Liara hummed from her omnitool.

Brooks seemed affronted "It's my investigation."

"Everybody stop bringing up the fish," Shepard huffed, ignoring the analyst, "I was all wet and dangling over a giant drop by one hand! Fuck fish! And this dress is ruined."

Trev cocked her head to the side "Why did you have it on anyway? I thought Joker is not your type."

"I'm everybody's type" the pilot murmured.

"I just bought it" Shepard shrugged, "And I like to feel pretty."

Wrex and Garrus seemed rather flabbergasted by that, Shepard being all girly, but wisely decided not to comment. Garrus was already domesticated on that front and Wrex has obviously been trained by Eve. Well, Urdnot Bakara. Whatever. And of course the rest of the female krogan population.

"It is very pretty" Vega nodded sagely, mouthing 'hot' when the red-head wasn't looking.

"Maybe changing into something else would be wise?" Trev proposed, ignoring Vega's mimed protests behind Shepard's back.

The red-head pouted "I guess. Hey, does anybody know a good dry-cleaner?"

Liara looked up from her omnitool and said patronizingly "Shepard, my friend, that dress is beyond salvage."

"Unless is for hot zombie chick for Halloween" Vega grinned.

Miranda rolled her eyes "What mister Vega is trying to say is that you are giving us a show. Go upstairs and get dressed."

"Yes, mom" Shepard rolled her eyes as well and stood up, "And it's nothing you haven't seen before."

"That goes just for me and T'Soni" the brunette countered.

"We don't mind" Garrus smirked.

"It is still tasteful enough" Trev hummed.

"I can't really judge" Tali shrugged.

"Brooks, deciding vote?" the commander turned to the analyst that was looking rather uncomfortable.

The officer shuffled her feet and cleared her throat "Perhaps some armor is in order as you have mercenaries after you?"

"Ah, that. Almost forgot"
"How can you…" Brooks' eyes bulged but then she calmed, "Right. Levity in face of conflict. Your file. I knew that."

"Alliance Intelligence has that on file?" Shepard appeared pleased.

"What's it say?" Vega asked with much interest, "That this whole group is loco?"

"Pretty much" Liara nodded, not looking from her omnitool.

Tali cocked her head to the side "You're guessing or you hacked it?"

"Hacked it"

"What!" Brooks was scandalized.

"Chill out" the Spectre waved it off, "So, I'm going to change and let Liara brief you."

"Shepard?" Liara hummed thoughtfully.

"Yes?"

"Do you own another dress?"

"Why?" the red-head asked suspiciously.

"I have a plan"

"Involving a dress?"

"And gambling" Liara grinned.

Shepard hummed "That doesn't sound too bad."

/ 

"You know, this radio show sucks" Garrus commented while fiddling with his hand of cards.

Miranda rolled her eyes "We're listening to Shepard's comm in case there is trouble at the casino. It's not supposed to be fun."

"It sucks"

"Yes mister Vakarian, you already mentioned that"

"I wanted to go to the benefit as well" Joker pouted, "I mean Wrex went."

Trev shrugged "Because he was invited. As the new leader of the krogan."

"I so look better in a tux than him" the pilot didn't let it go.

"We only had three tickets and Liara is the one to pay for them. It makes sense that Shepard took her along with Brooks. Plus her hacking is amazing if she got into Alliance Intelligence" Vega hummed and folded his cards.

"Not that hard" Tali mumbled, proud of her own hacking skills.

"Agreed" EDI nodded.
"Comforting" Vega sighed.

Garrus hummed "Speaking of, are all Alliance Intelligence this… jumpy? I mean in the Hierarchy Intelligence types are the badasses."

"She's faking" Miranda and Trev said simultaneously. The blonde continued "She's a bard. You learn to spot them after a while in the Game."

Miranda sighed and explained for the wider public "She means a spy. The way she behaves is an act."

Joker seemed most put out by the fact "Why though?"

The former Cerberus operative shrugged "I don't know. She might have an agenda. Or it just might be that she's deep in the mask. Or pretty much anything else."

"Keep an eye out but do not interfere" Garrus hummed and nodded to himself.

"Indeed" the noble agreed and splayed her cards.

"I win!" Tali exclaimed in glee, quickly reaching for her winnings.

Garrus tsked "You're too lucky today. I'm beginning to think we should've left you on Rannoch."

The quarian scoffed "Oh please, what do I know about farming."

"I thought the geth were helping?" Trev sighed as she collected the cards to shuffle them again.

"They are" Tali nodded, "We actually already have settlements. It is quite amazing. I heard that the geth have offered to help with our suits as well. We'll see how that goes."

"Will you be changing your name to vas Rannoch?" Miranda asked in curiosity.

Tali shrugged "Everybody did. We have a home now. A true home."

"You already had a home with us" Joker smiled, "And the Normandy is the best ship ever."

"But it's not a planet"

"I am most definitely better" EDI said in a monotone – she didn't really had the hang of voice modulation during jokes, sarcasm and the like.

"Agreed!" Joker nodded definitively.

Tali chuckled "Well, I did forgo Rannoch for you, so I guess I am agreeing also."

"And you don't get to farm" Garrus snickered.

Trev hummed "It would actually be interesting to know how you do that nowadays. My 'catching up' education didn't really cover that."

"You could ask... you know" Miranda replied, making a vague motion that somehow meant to mean her sister Oriana.

"True" the blonde smiled, "Have you had any news?"

Miranda's mood darkened considerably "She's fine. But he is making use of the current chaos around
the reapers to try again. I have made provisions though. I'm keeping an eye on it."

"Ehm, what are you talking about?" Vega arched an eyebrow.

"Don't worry about it" the former Cerberus operative said dismissively, "So, farming."

"Ugh" Tali summed it up.

Vega shrugged and changed the topic "So I heard at the bar that Shepard's mother got promoted. She's a Rear Admiral now."

Joker scrunched his brow "How come Shepard is still commander anyways? You'd think she would've gotten promoted ages ago."

Miranda shrugged "It's complicated – there was the Cerberus mess, the batarian mess and so on. She's rather… controversial."

"Plus 'Commander Shepard' is a brand name now" Garrus chimed in, "Everybody knows her as such. I'd say if we survive the reapers she will shoot directly to admiral."

"Quite plausible" Miranda agreed.

Vega chuckled "Can't really picture her as a serious admiral."

"It will be fun times in the Alliance, without doubt" Joker chuckled, "But she can be serious too. At the beginning of the Saren hunt she was completely formal. It took a while to melt but then… well, you know her."

"I was quite surprised" Garrus nodded emphatically, "I thought she was making fun of me at first. But nope. She's like that for real."

"And we love her for it" Tali laughed.

"Commander Shepard has finished the mission" EDI spoke up.

"Oh?" Miranda hummed and listened to the comm.

The mech nodded "I have data to analyze. I'm sorry Jeff, I cannot help you cheat anymore."

All heads swiveled to look at the Normandy's pilot who looked horrified "No, no, no, no! She's joking! No cheating going on here. Nope. See, I'm not even winning! If anyone is cheating it's Tali!"

"EDI?" Trev asked the AI.

"I am unsure"

"About?"

"Whether say 'yes' and continue the joke or say 'no' as Joker is very breakable"

Joker perked us "See! Not cheating. Vega you can stop popping your knuckles now."

"Good one" Garrus complimented EDI.

"Thank you"

"So," Vega declared, "What happened at the mission? I didn't listen to the ending."
Trevelyan shrugged "The man they were seeking is dead but he possibly left some files behind. EDI is working on it."

"Hm" the soldier nodded, "Had a faulty panic room then, I thought those were supposed to be impervious."

"Eh" Miranda made a so-so motion, obviously having the experience in breaching similar rooms.

"Comforting" Garrus smirked.

"Like you haven't done it, Archangel"

"With explosives, yes"

"Close enough"

/ 

"So this is the Citadel Archives, huh? Pity it's not open to public" Tali hummed appreciatively.

"Yes, about that" Brooks fiddled with her gun, "I'm not too comfortable you know, breaking in! This is a restricted facility! I can practically smell the court martial!"

"Chill for a moment" Shepard sighed, "We are chasing a dangerous person and I've got Spectre status. You are my sidekicks so everything is above board. Sort of."

"Plus with the reapers and all, this will warrant an explanation for the Council at maximum" Garrus shrugged.

"If we indeed manage to apprehend the… 'mysterious figure'. Otherwise our position isn't the best" Trev corrected.

"Eh, we'll get her" Shepard waved it off. Then she perked up "Cool though, right? Usually this kind of villain is a man. With an accent. Or with a cat."

"Go girl power" Mirada said dryly.

Garrus snorted and pitched his voice lower "I will take everything you have, everything you are. That's classic villain speech."

"Well, then it is apropos the group is called CAT-6, with the Alliance connotation and all" Vega hummed.

"Apropos?" Miranda arched an eyebrow at the burly soldier.

"Hey, I'm classy"

"My bad"

"Hey classy man, help me lift this grid, will you" Tali huffed from the point of the group.

"On it"

The aforementioned grid led into another rather large room, this one clearly purely for administration – functional desks, actual paper, paper!, files everywhere, a coffee machine. Oh and snipers. Don't forget the snipers.
"Not this again" Shepard sighed as several red dots zeroed onto her chest. In response the entire ground team sprang into action.

"It is Tuesday" Miranda shrugged while taking cover behind one of the pillars of the room.

"According to the clock it has been Wednesday for quite some time" EDI corrected.

"That's not really relevant, the Tuesdays-ness is comprised in the very fact that they are shooting at us" Garrus countered.

Liara rolled her eyes "I find we get shot no matter the day of the week."

"Agreed" Trev nodded.

Vega shook his head "True that. Also, those are the CAT-6? I expected more."

"They were dishonorably discharged – that means they got caught. Can't be too bright" Miranda shrugged and punctuated her words by getting three of their opponents with one singularity.

"Good thing they work under me then" a vaguely familiar voice said from above. And from behind Brooks that was held at gunpoint.

"Sorry for getting caught" Brooks said in her most pathetic voice.

"Aw" the woman behind her smirked, "No need for that. After all, you got caught by the great commander Shepard."

"Eeeeh, lady?" Shepard frowned and waved enthusiastically to get the woman's attention, "I got an ID right here."

"Come out of cover and put your weapons down"

"Eh, what about no?" the commander cocked her head to the side.

In the ensuing silence Garrus hummed "You know, I bet we get to see the villain without her helmet if we do. It's time for the epic reveal."

"Well, everything so far did follow vid logics so..." Vega trailed out.

Wrex shrugged "Let's just kill them all. We can check under the helmet once they're cold."

"I can get behind that" Miranda nodded, getting an approving grin form the krogan.

The figure behind Brooks huffed "No matter, you can't get away from my snipers. While you were doing that clown parade I had reinforcement coming."

"They always do" Garrus didn't seem bothered in the least.

"Yeah. If you want to monologue, now is the time. Otherwise we will move right to the shooting part" Shepard nodded.

The chief villainess snorted in disgust but did throw Brooks to the side and put her hands underneath her helmet to unlatch it. The heroes dutifully waited as the script prescribed.

…
"Oh Keelah" Tali was first to exclaim at the big reveal, "We're not in a vid, we're in a telenovela!"

"Evil twins, really" Garrus shook his head in disappointment.

"A clone, huh?" Miranda for her part seemed quite intrigued.

Shepard was as well "Soooo, how did you end up with that handsome face?"

Evil Shepard snorted "Why don't you ask you dear friend Lawson?"

The commander didn't bother "Ah, so the Illusive fuck got you built. I was just thinking we didn't hear from him in a while."

"Guess he didn't believe I could actually rebuild you" Miranda scoffed, "Insulting really."

"Insulting is the right word" the second of the red-heads sneered, "I am far superior than you can ever be, Jane, and yet I was discarded. Back up. Kept in case you needed anew kidney, lung or arm."

"So you're me only the Lego version?"

"No!" close Shepard growled ferociously, "I am you but better in every way. For one I am not a lunatic like you. I read your file but this… You are crazy. And all your friends are too."

"Been telling that from the start" Vega mumbled.

Tali shushed him and asked instead "How come you don't like us, you're her clone? Identical, no?"

"Fortunately not" the clone chuckled derisively, "I have no emotional baggage, no memories of our association. I am the lone wolf Shepard was always meant to be! I am the Shepard that can and will do anything that is necessary to win! I am Shepard! You are the cheap knock-off! I will take your ship, your identity, your everything!"

"Am I that dramatic?" Shepard tuned to her friends.

"A little" Garrus shrugged.

"But dramatic in an endearing way. Not like this" Trev shook her head.

"Yeah, not a douche" Vega nodded.

"Wait, did she say ship?" Liara frowned.

Shepard immediately turned to EDI "Get on lockdown."

"I can't" the bot actually frowned, "The authorization was taken from me. By you. Or your codes to be more precise."

Evil Shepard smiled and waved tauntingly "You didn't really think I wouldn't think of that."

"Eh" Miranda said doubtfully.

The clone smirked and brought her hand to her ear "Traynor, prepare for immediate take-off. No questions, just do it. It is an emergency."

"Aye aye" the specialist's voice replied from the radio.
"You're the only loose end now" the faux-Shepard chuckled darkly, "For me to be you, you need to die. Bye-bye, former commander Shepard."

As the cloned woman turned and left with a wave, all the CAT-6 opened fire again.

"What a drama queen" Garrus hummed, the scope of his sniper rifle already at his eye.

"Hey! That's an almost-me you're talking about!"

"Like you don't agree with me"

"Ok, she is annoying"

"And her henchmen aren't worth the hassle" Miranda spoke up.

"All this had too many bells and whistles for my taste. What happened to a good old-fashioned massacre?" Wrex grumbled.

"We got useful intel out of it" Trevelyan pointed out.

"Yeah, I don't get why the villains have this need to monologue. Like explain their plan to the heroes. I think it's silly. Isn't it?" Tali asked.

Vega nodded "Definitely."

"But how would the audience know what is going on?" EDI reminded.

"We have an audience?" Liara's eyes narrowed.

"In the metaphorical sense"

"Uh-uh"

"And that's the last one. Scoped and dropped!" Garrus flicked his mandibles in a turian smirk.

"Vakarian, what did I tell you about that particular line?"

"That it's not cool enough?"

Shepard nodded gravely "Same goes for Miranda's 'night, night'."

The brunette in question huffed and glared at Trev who was biting her lip to prevent her from laughing out-loud. Then she made a motion towards the door "Shouldn't we, you know, pursue? Before she steals your Spectre codes as well?"

"Not a bad idea" the commander agreed magnanimously.

"Ya think?" Brooks snarked, getting up from where she crawled in after the shootout started.

"Oh, you're alive?" Miranda asked, genuinely surprised by the development.

"Yes!"

Garrus hummed "Congrats. Guess evil Shepard is a complete fuck up. I thought she at least got one of us."

"I'll be sure to teach her the error of her ways" Shepard shrugged, "As soon as we find her that is."
Ideas?"
Liara smirked "I might."

"Isn't that the VI you got at Hagalaz?" Tali frowned surveying the new addiction to the team.

"Glyph, right?" Trev cocked her head to the side.

"How may I assist you doctor T'Soni?"

"We need to track a target. Give us updates on its location" the asari instructed.

"What is the nature of the target?"

"She looks like me, only in a way less cool armor" Shepard answered.

"And way less cool team" Garrus chimed in.

"Understood"

Trevelyan hummed appreciatively "He must be programmed really well to actually understand those parameters."

"It, not he" Tali corrected on reflex.

"Commander, the less cool you is a level down and several meters ahead"

"Lead the way" Shepard nodded.

Following the VI led them deeper into the Archives. Most fascinating was the level that not only had stored information about historical events but actually showed them in holo. Miranda practically had to drag Trev by her arm when they stumbled onto those as the former templar found them just fascinating. Liara seemed saddened as well but not too bothered as the Broker had her way into getting what she wanted. Never mind the classified facility.

Trevelyan finally stopped lamenting about not having time to go through the Archives properly when they encountered yet another ambush squad of CAT-6. This particular squad seemed to be focused more on the defense than offense as those mercs carried omni-shields.

"Shepard," Trev said in an icy voice, "It's happening again! Your sis is copying me. Seriously, can't you people be original once in a while!"

"Not this again" Miranda bemoaned.

"Not 'sis" the red-head chuckled, dismissing the rest of the sentence, "If that was the case, mother would blow a gasket. Heh, I think I'm going to call her after this."

"That would be the day" Miranda muttered.

"Hey, I thought we had a deal about mommy/daddy issues"

"Sorry"

"Is there a club?" Tali gestured dangerously with her shotgun, "How come I wasn't invited?"

"Me too" Liara nodded with a small smile.
"Me three" Wrex laughed.

"Eh, in theory I could…" Garrus hummed.

"There is no club" Shepard exhaled loudly, "If there was I'd bet most of those guys here would clamor for membership."

"Yes, they always do interrupt the conversation at the most inopportune times" Trevelyan said dryly.

When yet another shootout ended Tali turned from the corpses to Shepard again "Back to our conversation. I…"

"Does the Illusive Man count as my father?" EDI asked.

Everybody halted after that, trying to get their thoughts in order. In the end Trev was the first to reply "I don't think so. But he could qualify for pater familias though."

"Pater familias?" Shepard arched an eyebrow, "Did you take your 'catching up with the times' education start from ancient Rome?"

"I like history" the noble shrugged.

"The term is adequate" EDI nodded, apparently satisfied about the answer. Which was great as the rest found it a bit awkward as an avenue of thought.

"More enemies ahead" Wrex informed with a grin.

"Thank god" Vega murmured, hoping that would cut off the awkward discussion.

"Atlas" Tali warned in an almost bored tone.

"How did they fit one here?" Miranda arched her eyebrows.

Wrex was already running towards it "Don't know, don't care. Hahahahaha!"

"Ah, kids" Shepard wiped a fake tear, joining in on the dismantling of the big machine.

It took an embarrassingly short time and the whole team, minus a queasy Brooks, huddled around a elevated perch that held the last CAT-6 that was busy on the radio "We can't hold them sir! They got a krogan! And… and…"

"Useless"

Hero Shepard waved at the terrified merc "Heya. See, this is why you always check if you're not buying counterfeit. Fakes are just the worst."

"Please…" the man started but then Wrex took him out of cover by his chest plate and landed a truly terrifying headbutt right in the middle on the reflective helmet. The mercenary landed into an undignified heap onto the floor, blood leaking from the smashed helmet.

"Right" Sheppard hummed cheerfully, "Glyph? Where next?"

"Through the door right ahead, commander"

As they passed several checkpoints Liara commented "We must be getting into a more secure part of the Archives."
"Doesn't really seem secure to me" Trev commented when they were let through at even turn.

"Spectre access authorized" at Archive VI spoke and opened yet another door.

Shepard smirked "See, we get an easy ride because of me. I would hope that one that didn't have access would get a much harder time."

Miranda and Liara inadvertently caught each other's eyes and both shrugged with a shared smirk. Trev rolled her eyes and mumbled "Bards."

"This panel was recently accessed" Tali exclaimed and immediately went towards it. The rest of the squad followed, hoping to get some intel.

Aaaand of course that was the moment they all got trapped.

A force field they saw around the various vaults and specimens sprung around them, trapping them in place. Vega immediately tried firing at it, only almost injuring the rest of the team when the weapon's fire bounced back.

Trev was the first to notice that Brooks was the only one that remained free and quite pleased with herself. She sighed and reiterated "Bards" with a shake of her head.

"This is almost disappointing. The great commander Shepard getting caught like this" Brooks pouted in an over-dramatic fashion.

"Good thing she will not be Shepard in just a moment" the clone smirked as she made her way to a console beside Brooks.

"Did you think a mere VI could outsmart good-old human intelligence" the fake analyst said patronizingly.

Shepard cocked her head to the side, completely unbothered and addressed her friends "Is it me or her voice is somehow more annoying than it was before?"

"Told you she's a bard" Trev shrugged, "And yes. But at least it isn't as high-pitched as before."

"Now that I think about it I'd wager she modeled her character after Traynor. The babbling and geekiness" Miranda hummed.

"Excuse you! My Sam is far more sexy. And cute. And geeky" the red-head put her hands to her sides menacingly.

"I said modeled after, I didn't say she succeeded" Miranda defended.

"Better"

Liara chuckled softly "I agree with Lawson, after all it is easy to determine your type."

"If that is quite enough" Shepard-the-clone brought the attention back to her.

"More villain talk?" Garrus cocked his head to the side.

"No" the clone glared, "I already have everything I came for. Brooks, lock them up, I have to unpack in my new cabin at the Normandy."

"Don't forget about feeding the fish!" Trev called after her, getting weird looks for her trouble,
"What? Haven't the Shepards killed enough of them?"

The platform they were standing on lurched and then smoothly continued down and then to the side, the force-field keeping the team unable to escape. Soon they were shoved inside a vault among other rows of vaults.

Shepard sighed and turned to Trev "Why is everybody so hung-up on my fish? I don't do it deliberately you know."

"GLYPH!" Liara called instead after rolling her eyes for good measure.

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"I can't get us any closer" Steve explained as he decelerated the skycar, Joker doing the same right behind him, "Control could shoot us down if we get to close."

"Alright" Trev nodded even if it was a bit of a problem – they did take quite a while to get out of the Citadel Archives and then to the Docks. The clone and Brooks had quite a lead. Still, taking off wasn't something that could be hurried too much, even for a ship of the Normandy's importance.

"EDI!" Miranda exclaimed when Joker let the passengers of the second skycar disembark, "Shepard, what happened?"

Wrex that carefully took the limp body of the AI from the vehicle frowned "She just dropped."

"I think the clone had to have severed..." Tali begun but then the bot jerked and her eyes opened again.

"...severed my connection to the ship" EDI finished for herself.

"Is that possible?" Garrus scratched his head.

"I thought she was the ship" Vega murmured.

"I feel… limited" the AI said in an unsure, almost frightened, voice.

"Ok, this is it" Shepard huffed, "I had enough of the evil twin thing. Let's go kick her ass. Nobody harms my crew. And my ship!"

"You said it" Wrex grinned broadly.

"Yeeeeeah" the red-head turned to him, "You're not getting on the ship. I will be taking in a smaller team of tidy people. I won't have any mess on my ship. You, my dear blood-raged, charging and vicious friend, are staying behind."

"What!"

"You can clean up the docks, I see they left plenty of CAT-6 for us" the commander said resolutely, "Miranda, Liara, Garrus and Tali go with me. Vega and Wrex, you have the docks. Joker, Cortez you take care of EDI. And you know, keep an eye on her. Just in case my clone wants to mess her up."

"And myself?" Trev frowned.

"You'll have the honor of speaking to the Alliance and C-See" Shepard smiled sweetly, "You're the XO and still have your codes. Just… try to make this sound believable."
"Good luck with that" Vega chuckled.

"Joy" Trev said through gritted teeth.

"Good! The rest of you, let's go! On the double!" Shepard grinned and broke into jog, already palming her shotgun.

When the rest of the team disappeared into the bowels of the dock 42, Steve turned to the former templar "Sir?"

Trevelyan rubbed her brow "EDI, could you please climb back into the skycar? I don't really want C-Sec and the likes to see you. Cortez, Joker, you do the same. Just go. I'll deal with this."

"You sure?" Joker asked despite casting a worried glance at EDI who silently obeyed and went to the skycar.

"Yes"

"Good luck" Steve reiterated Vega's previous words, only actually meaning them.

"Thanks. Now go, go" Trevelyan waved them off. Then she took a deep breath and plastered a decidedly fake smile on her face. She tapped her omnitool a few times and then brought her had to her ear "Commander Bailey, how are you!"

Commander Bailey looked at the mangled body of someone that looked a whole lot like Shepard. He looked up to look at the actual woman. The red-head smiled at him brilliantly. He sighed.

"Is he alright?" Vega whispered to Miranda, "He's been doing that like five minutes already."

"He isn't as used to madness as we are" the brunette shrugged.

Bailey sighed heavily and rubbed his face with both of his hands "Well, at least now I know lieutenant Trevelyan isn't crazy."

"Nope" Shepard didn't drop her smile.

"Debatable" Vega murmured, his stance on the sanity of the ground team unchanged.

"Where is she by the way?" Miranda asked, looking around.

"With the Alliance representative here at the Citadel" Bailey replied, not taking his hand off his face, "They are discussing the second body."

"Ah yes" Shepard smiled yet again, though this time more genuinely, "Brooks or whoever she is was nice enough to resist arrest. Quite thoughtful of her."

The former operative smirked "Indeed. Saved tax-payers a lot of money that way. And time. Those pesky trials with Cerberus personnel."

"You didn't mention she was Cerberus" Bailey said sharply, looking up at her.

Shepard shook her head "Formerly. She went rogue. But fake-Shepard is from a Cerberus lab."

"Why am I not surprised"
"Soooo" the red-head shuffled her feet a little bit, "I know this is big and all, but I kinda wanna go to my girlfriend. I mean friend! That is a girl. Girl-friend. No fraternization here! Haha."

Bailey just blinked slowly as Shepard started to babble. Then he turned to Miranda "I think we can be pretty sure she's who she says she is."

"Yep" Vega sighed.

"….and she just saved the day. With a toothbrush! A biotic whatever toothbrush, but still a toothbrush! She's awesome" Shepard finished her little speech and looked at the chief of security with her big eyes filled with hope.

Bailey looked at the two comparatively more sane Normandy crewmembers with resigned despair "Toothbrush?"

"Long story" Miranda shrugged.

"Right"

Chapter End Notes

AN: I loved DLC Citadel - it was hilarious. And it brought back all the characters! And I loved the continuation of Mordin's singing.
Canticle of Exaltations

Chapter Notes

AN: Bad joke in the second part. Quite lame. I went to delete it and start over but then a friend persuaded me to leave it. So I guess I'm owning up to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shepard awoke with a start. For a moment she was confused but then she realized she was in the master bedroom of Anderson's Citadel apartment. Well, her apartment now apparently. Her second realization of the day was the unusual weight on her side and shoulder was comms specialist Traynor. Her face split into a big smile and her whole body relaxed.

Even the apartments that were right on Silversun strip where there was constant evening had the feature of morning sunlight coming through the windows if the owner wished it. Anderson apparently did because the bed was bathed in faux sunlight that made Sam's honeyed skin practically glisten. Shepard lightly traced a finger over the skin and experienced a moment of peace. After god knows how long. It was beautiful.

"It's too early Jane, go back to sleep" Sam murmured sleepily, not opening her eyes.

"I will" the red-head whispered, trying to hide the tightness of her throat.

She didn't succeed as Traynor lifted up her head from Shepard's shoulder, brow furrowing in concern "What is it?"

"It's nothing"

"Shepard"

The Spectre scrunched her eyes and leaned further into her lover "Just that this is the perfect moment. Calm and peace. Love. Maybe… maybe for the last time."

"We will kick the reaper's arses!" Sam said resolutely.

The sudden exclamation surprised the red-head and forced a chuckle out of her "Damn Traynor. Fierce."

"That's news to you? Maybe I should've gone harder last night then"

Shepard laughed, appreciating the attempt at levity, and brushed their lips together "Want to rectify your error?"

"Mmm, yes, but first we talk"

"Ominous"

Traynor rubbed her eyes from sleep so that she could meet her lover's eyes properly "I feel reassured that you keep the fight against the reapers on your mind, that you plan and think, but it shouldn't keep you from enjoying the rest. The right now. This war might seem a bit insurmountable at this
moment but if we just take it one day at a time…"

"One day at a time, hm?"

"At least that what my shrink said and it helped me a lot"

"Oh?" Shepard hummed in a careful non-question.

Samantha smiled warmly at the attempt and kissed the red-heads cheek, answering anyway "Yes. Do you know where I am from?"

The biotic frowned, trying to remember "You told me just a colony in the Terminus."

"And that is the truth. I try, or well tried, to go home often, every longer shore-leave I got. See family, see my home"

"That's good" the vanguard grinned but was still confused.

"It is. Or would be if I hadn't been born on Horizon"

"Oh" Shepard's eyes widened in realization.

"I was there when the Collectors attacked, when they paralyzed us and tried to 'collect' us" Sam shivered at the memory, "I didn't even know it had been you and the team to save us, it didn't really matter at the time – I wasn't well for a long time afterwards. But. As my shrink said – one day at a time. Forget about what will be or might be, just think about today. Right now you aren't fighting the reapers, you are in bed with me."

"That I am" the red-head almost whispered and clung to her lover she didn't know she almost didn't meet.

"Yes, so please, while we are here, forget about the war"

"I will try"

"I'll help with the distraction" Sam chuckled lightly and let her lips roam over the paler skin underneath her.

"You are amazing" Shepard said reverently, not really referring to the amorous advances right now. She was awed by the unexpected strength – to be so cheerful as the brunette was since she met her at that comms console despite having been through quite an ordeal. She truly was a marvel. And Shepard was grateful to have found her.

" Damn right"

The vanguard barked out a laugh "And so humble."

"You are talking about humble miss commander fuckin' Shepard?"

"Point"

"And seeing I am a truly wonderful girlfriend that will help curb your ego – after this you're making breakfast. I want a full English breakfast. Cooked, not ordered" the specialist dictated.

"What? I can't cook!" Shepard's eyes widened in panic.
"You can't?" Sam's lip trembled in a truly Oscar-worthy performance.

"I'll learn!"

Traynor laughed "Sucker."

"And you are evil" the red-head pouted.

"Oh please, I ravished you in this bed, that giant bath, and the bed again. And I'll do so again this morning. How's that me being evil?"

"No way what so ever. Proceed"

"Aye-aye, commander"

"But you could phrase it better – you made it sound so one-sided. Which it most definitely wasn't. I may have liked you telling me what to do but that still counts as me doing the job! Right?"

"Of course. Now be a dear and give the lady an orgasm, would you?"

"Hello again, commander Bailey"

The man didn't look up from his terminal, instead he sighed and put a hand over his eyes "What happened this time lieutenant Trevelyan? Orcs? Dragons? Unicorns? The doctor?"

"Who?"

"Exactly"

Trev was quite confused but shrugged "Nothing extraordinary this time. I'm here to bail some of the Normandy crew. It seems they were… rowdy last night at the bar."

"Oh"

"You sound disappointed"

"Not at all, I had just prepared myself for the worst"

"Might yet come as I was still on shore leave before I got the call and had to come here" the former templar almost growled.

Bailey chuckled "Please ease on the glare, I don't want piss in my cells, thank you. You can deal with your subordinates somewhere else."

"Oh I will" Trev gave him a smiled devoid of humor.

"Poor sods" the man smirked and brought up his omnitool, "Tell the officer outside to take you to the cells. Bail has been sent to the Alliance, I just need your print here."

"Not only they wasted my precious free time but also the Alliance's money in a time of war" Trev summed up coldly, "How… disgraceful."

"They got a little rowdy, no need to bring up the firing squad" Bailey said with a serious expression.

"If they were only a little rowdy they would've not gotten arrested"
"We can keep them a little longer if that would ease your ire" the man shrugged, "Losing a full day of precious shore leave to be stuck in a cell seems like an appropriate punishment."

"Hm, perhaps. Yes, release them tomorrow morning. But first I'm going to have a little chat with them"

Bailey typed something into his omnitool again and sighed "Just aim for ashamed rather than angry if you manage."

"I shall" Trev nodded, "I will also remind them, as well as the rest of the crew, that in my capacity as XO I not only deal with matter of discipline and conduct, but also arrange and coordinate drills and exercises. A practical reminder of course. It seems my crew is lacking in discipline. Instead of our last day of shore leave I'd say."

Bailey whistled "Collective punishment? Harsh."

The blonde shrugged "I disagree. Well, I'll let you work."

"Have a good one"

Trevelyon bowed slightly in goodbye and left in search of the officer that would bring her to the dunge.. hm, the cells.

The crewmen were hangover and quite pitiful so that business got sorted quickly so the former templar was leaving C-Sec in a much better mood than she entered it, now once more looking forward to her time-off. She was so caught up in her plans she almost missed when someone called her name.

"Jack?" Trev exclaimed in surprise, "What are you doing here?"

"Shore leave" the younger woman shrugged, "Forgot I was Alliance already?"

"It is still a strange notion"

"Yeah, even weirder for me" Jack shrugged once more, "But sure as hell I'm not wearing a uniform. I'm keeping my 'consultant' status."

Trev smirked "I think you would look rather fetching. Like the hair by the way."

"So you said already. Hey, this means Shep and the rest are around here too?" the biotic looked around.

"Indeed. Oh, I think Shepard is planning a party for our last day of shore leave, you could come"

"Party? Sign me in! I hope the quality of the booze didn't deteriorate when Dickhead the Illusive got booted off"

The noble grimaced at the name for the Cerberus leader but shook her head "I do not think so. Also, the party wouldn't be on the ship but Shepard's apartment."

"Shep's got an apartment?" a grin slowly spread itself on Jack's face, "Give me the address, I think a visit from an old friend would do her good. I love the brats but boy I could use some adult company."

"Just not too adult, Shepard's got a girlfriend"
"Oho? Tell me more"

"Better ask Shepard"

"Spoilsport. I guess it was expected, with you fucking cheerleader she rubbed onto you"

Trev sighed in slight exasperation, not that she expected decorum from her companion, and asked "Why do you call her cheerleader still? She's left TIM behind quite a while ago."

Jack sneered "You should've heard her spouting Cerberus propaganda right the first time we met. You and Shep might've curbed some of it but she still believes that some things they were doing, at least those she did personally, were right. Plus I just don't like her."

"Ho? And here me and the crew thought it was some sort of aggressive foreplay" the noble smirked. "I would destroy her" Jack said with a dark glint in her eye but then blinked and it was gone "Besides, I only took a walk to the Sapphic side once. Not my style."

"To each their own"

"Right. Enjoy cheerleader, I'm going to Shep's. I want her to meet Eezo" the younger woman shrugged.

"Who?" Trev arched an eyebrow.

"My adorable combat varren"

The former templar completely ignored the varren on the Citadel part and smirked instead "You know the word adorable? How… soft."

"Fuck you"

"Thaat's the Jack I know"

Jack presented her the middle finger and took off. Trevelyan watched her go and hummed to herself. Then she brought up her omnitool to warn Shepard that she might have company soon. She left out any mention of the varren – for one she wasn't sure if the tattooed woman was telling the truth, getting a permit for a varren would be nigh impossible, and two, Shepard would do the same damn thing and then laugh from the sidelines.

"Anxiously questioning: Are you from commander Shepard's crew"

Trev looked up from her omnitool and then up some more to meet the eyes of an elcor "I am."

"Urgently: I must speak to you on behalf of my people. Sorrowfully : The reapers have come to Decuuna, my homeworld. With faint hope: Our warriors are under siege but you can rescue them. Urgently: Please."

"Have you tried the asari and the other races?" since he was excellently dressed, for an elcor, Trev assumed she was speaking with the ambassador.

"With anguish: They have turned us away. Angrily: They say they do not have the resources"

"Well, this doesn't seem like the job for a single ship, but I will confer with Admiral Hackett and our allies" the noble hummed thinking that perhaps the quarians could help. Now they had plenty of mostly empty ships that they could use for rescue. Tali would know if this was feasible since the
Alliance itself would probably gave the same answer as the rest of the ambassadors.

"Grateful exasperation: Thank you. Anxiously: Please do so soon."

Trev nodded "Of course."

As soon as the conversation was over the blonde speed walked away, not wanting to be caught by a request again. Normally those would go to Udina or Osoba, the ambassador, but well… Udina was dead and Osoba suffered a minor breakdown after the death of his son that served in the Alliance. Naturally his office had picked up the slack but many people in high positions preferred to deal with someone with a little bit more authority and the Normandy was the flagship. The symbol of the fight against the reapers, not only to humans but the other races as well. Plus the fact they had a direct line to Hackett helped a lot.

"Excuse me, are you from the Normandy?" an asari in a lab coat asked eagerly.

Trev actually contemplated saying no, she was on shore leave dammit, but she didn't – she was too much of a nice person. She hated that trait so much sometimes. "Yes."

"How fortunate! Here, let me explain why we need this…"

As the asari droned on Trevelyan cast a longing glance at Citadel transport that was only a few steps away. She almost made it.

This was shaping up to be a long day.

"Hey sis"

Miranda grinned widely, a thing she almost never did even in Trev's presence. But this was her baby sister, and someone she let close astonishingly fast. She really owed Traynor a lot for arranging this. "Oriana."

The younger twin smiled "You look well. Much better than when I saw you last time."

"We are on shore leave so I'm rested. Not that time off prevented Trev from working" Miranda rolled her eyes.

Oriana laughed "Here I thought you were the workaholic in the relationship. Admit it, you worked as well."

"So I did"

"HA!"

"Good thing I did because I received disturbing news…" Miranda said, ignoring her sister's 'of course you did', "Father found one of my decoys. He… wasn't happy."

Oriana leaned closer to her screed with a frown "Your decoy wasn't a person, right? Please tell me it wasn't a person."

"It wasn't a person" the older sister reassured a little sadly – she was fully prepared to go that road if need be, even if that meant both Oriana and Trev's contempt.

"Good. So what happened?"
"Cerberus came so now we know for certain they are colluding together. Father is doing some big project but he's getting restless since part of the payment was, well, you"

"What project?" Oriana frowned.

"Don't know yet" Miranda admitted and looked down.

"Hey, you're my super-awesome big sister, you'll find out eventually"

The operative gritted her teeth "Hopefully not too late – I spent much of the pre-reaper six months trying to track father down, unsuccessfully, and now I know he is pretty much in the same location for a long period of time and I still can't find him!"

"Everything will work out, you'll see" Oriana said reassuringly, "Let's talk about something else, that Henry is after me isn't new information and I will be super careful."

"Are you sure you're safe on the Crucible? I can arrange more protection or…"

"Miranda, I'm fine" the younger sister chuckled, "Nobody here knows my name and Hackett personally assigned me to a very trusted group. Nothing will happen to me."

"I just worry" Miranda gave her a small bashful smile.

"I know. And I love you too sis"

"I'm ever so glad that Trev persuaded me to talk to you that day on Illium"

Oriana grinned "Me too. Boy, my parents were shocked. Nevermind them for a moment, how's Trev? And Shepard! And the rest of the hero crew."

"Hero crew? I'm glad I never gave you Vakarian's info, you'd give him ideas" Miranda chuckled, "Everybody's alright, happy to have time off I imagine. Trev went with Traynor to the arcades, Shepard and Garrus are having a sniping competition which I can't understand for the life of me – I mean Shepard is a vanguard and never uses anything other than her shotgun and pistol. I just hope she didn't bet anything too big."

"You're such a mom"

Miranda lost her smile and frowned instead "You… remember what I told you before right? About us."

"That we can't have biological children, I know. We can always adopt or have an asari kid or our partner's child. Heck you can ask Trev to plop out one for you if you want. Don't be so down about it" Oriana waved it off.

The older sister let out a slightly bitter laugh "You're right, but it's just one more way father screwed us over. We are not normal in yet another way. He just had to meddle with everything."

"Mira, I don't want to be rude, but deal with it" Oriana said softly, "You can make him pay however you wish, but there are just some things that you can't change. This is one of them. The sooner you accept it, the sooner you can move on. By the way, did you tell Trevelyan?"

"I did not"

"Mira…"
The older brunette sighed "I know I should've, I had a good opportunity to tell her after she made a bad joke about motherhood, but... it's just hard to talk about it."

"But it weighs heavily on you and you could share that burden"

"When did you get so wise?" Miranda chuckled.

Oriana grinned and flicked her hair "Right? I'm awesome."

"But a brat"

"Rude!"

Both sisters laughed, letting the previous heavy atmosphere flitter away. Miranda smiled "I will tell her. Not that the topic is actual in any way with the war going on. Also, Trev has expressed a mild disgust at having a human being dropping from her body."

"Yeeehah, can't say I disagree right now. It's way too early for me, I'm not old like you" Oriana smirked.

"I beg your pardon! I'm not old" the operative exclaimed dramatically.

"Hag"

"Squirt"

"Biddy"

"Milk-drinker"

"Ah sisterhood, how adorable" Trev spoke up suddenly, grinned and wiped an imaginary tear from her eye.

"Trev!" Oriana waved at the approaching blonde with a big smile.

"Finally home?" Miranda arched an eyebrow as Trev took off the coat and cap of her uniform.

Trevelyan smiled tiredly and fell into a hug "Honey, I'm home."

"Awww" Oriana cooed.

Miranda chuckled "Did Traynor teach you this one?"

"Yup."

The first thing Trevelyan felt that morning was the horrible taste in her mouth. Then came the queasiness, the pounding headache and dryness of eyes despite them still being closed. Only after cataloguing her suffering another thought came into her head and that was the strangeness of her pillow.

Trev's eyes shot open in a moment of panic that was only validated when she saw that she was indeed sleeping on Traynor's stomach. She calmed when she felt another body, this one quite familiar, spooning her from behind. Miranda was there so one of the worst case scenarios was discarded. Then a very blurry memory came to her, one that has an amused and still quite sober Shepard helping the three of them into her bed while mumbling something about 'Cerberus implants'
and 'trying ryncol with Wrex'.

Mystery solved, the noble settled her head onto a different surface and tried to fall asleep again, hopefully to wake in a better shape.

"Trev?" Sam's voice decided to hinder those plans.

"Shhh, not now"

"What… oh my god, my head!"

"Shh, Miranda's still asleep"

"I wish"

"Miranda?" Sam blinked heavily and tried to lift her head a little but gave up almost immediately. The brunette snuggled closer to Trev and answered with a mere "Mmmm."

A burst of laughter made the three woman flinch and reluctantly open their eyes to see a daisy fresh Shepard standing over them "Sooo, enjoyed party I take it?"

"Fuck off"

"That's not nice Lawson" the red-head said chidingly, her grin firmly in place, "Here I was checking up on you and bring you water. But since you are all up you can come down for breakfast. Vega is making eggs."

"He can sod off too" Sam said in a soft voice, one much more pleasing to their hung over selves.

"Mmm. And If I ever hear you bitching again about Cerberusu implats, I'm slapping you" Miranda mumbled.

Shepard crossed her arms "Hey, I couldn't get drunk properly yesterday, it was horrible!"

"Mmm"

"Hating you right now" Traynor agreed.

"I had to try ryncol! And that shit tastes.. well, like shit"

"Where did you sleep anyway?" Sam asked, "Couldn't handle the three of us at the same time?"

The commander grinned "If you are well enough for jokes you'll be fine coming to the kitchen. And I slept in the living room. Even with the implants ryncol hits you suddenly."

"Mmm"

"Drop this Miranda, come on up. And Trev… Trev?" Shepard squinted, "Did she fall asleep for real?"

Miranda smiled fondly "Yeah."

"Wake her up. Come on, it's the last day of shore leave!" Shepard exclaimed, "We need to make it count."

"Especially if Trev designated the afternoon for several drills and exercises" Sam grumbled.
The older brunette nodded "I'm glad not to be regular crew. Consultant suits me just fine."

"I'm seriously miffled leave is to be cut short" Traynor grumbled and poked the XO's sleeping form, "You hear me?"

The next five minutes was spent trying to get Trevelyan to wake up and get her moving so that they all could get downstairs for some much needed breakfast to stabilize their stomachs. Still, they were in a much better shape than Tali that lived up to her reputation of lightweight. Jack was roaring with laughter when she saw them, especially Miranda, and took great pleasure in speaking especially loud.

Despite the obvious, breakfast was a calm and serene affair. Judging by her expression Shepard was the one that enjoyed it most – watching happily what pretty much amounted to her family and friends, free of worries and just having fun.

Naturally it was just then her omnitool lit up with an incoming call, courtesy of the asari councilor. Shepard whined and moved into another room not to disturb the rest. With one deep breath she answered "Yes?"

"Still on the Citadel?"

"Like you don't know" the red-head arched an eyebrow, knowing full well that the councilmen had more than enough spies and operatives even outside the Spectres.

"Come to my office, I have some information for you"

"Pertinent to what?"

"The reapers"

Shepard had a foreboding feeling that tightened her stomach with nerves and dread "I'm on my way."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Some more shore leave because they deserve it, especially since we all know what happens next. The reapers advance in the next chapter, stay tuned :-P
"Well?" Shepard said impatiently.

Trev that took place just off the galaxy map, her usual spot now occupied by the commander in full armor, checked her omnitool again "We're just waiting on Engineering. Both Lieutenant Adams and Tali wanted to be extra-thorough just in case we were left with any Cerberus surprises."

"Did you tell them our next mission is of the highest priority?"

"Of course. But better be safe than sorry"

"We have garnered too much delay already" Shepard frowned, "We cannot afford more."

The noble merely nodded, realizing that her friend just wanted to complain even if she knew were well the importance of the Normandy being truly checked after all the repairs and upgrades. On the other hand Trevelyan understood her urgency – the Reapers have entered the Athena Nebula with Thessia as their target.

Traynor that stayed silent during the whole wait, checking her own systems, spoke up "Is it just me or it's really fishy that the asari suddenly have vital information just as they have come under attack?"

Shepard's lips were a tight line "No."

"It must be something important not to volunteer the information earlier" Trev hummed, "But it's true we only deciphered the part about the Catalyst fairly recently. Councilor Tevos did say it was about that, right?"

"So the cold fish hinted"

Shepard seemed to retreat deep in thought so the two women just shrugged and waited on that last readiness report. And then finally Trev's omnitool beeped.

"Well?" the red-head asked again.

"Green across the board. We are ready to depart at your say so"

"Let's get moving then" Shepard nodded resolutely.

"Control has accepted our Council priority and we have a clear path to the Relay" Traynor supplied just as Joker made the ship-wide announcement of their departure and the probability of entering a combat zone.

The entire CIC crew seemed to hold their breath, waiting on what they would encounter on the other side. The last reports was that Thessia wasn't under attack yet – the reapers have entered the system
and were intercepted by the asari fleet, but that paled in comparison to the turian or the Alliance one. They all knew how well those fared.

"Exiting relay in three... two... one..." EDI counted down, "Destination reached."

A moment later Joker announced in a defeated tone "Entering stealth."

It was an all too familiar view – the reapers advancing mercilessly while the defending fleet, the last line of defense around the asari homeworld, was falling apart as they were utterly crushed. Same as Earth, same as Palaven, the claw-like ships just couldn't be stopped. The planet in the background was already under a heavy attack, the results of which were visible even from so far out.

"Even Thessia" Traynor whispered.

Shepard nodded "Can we get hold of the scientists at the temple?"

"No, the comms are scrambled"

"Of course they are" the biotic said bitterly, "Is the temple still standing at least?"

"Shepard!" someone gasped just behind them. The red-head jerked and turned to Liara that just came out of the elevator. The asari sneered "And I was the one to become cold? That's my world that is burning down there, my people!"

"You know I didn't mean anything by it" Shepard said in a conciliatory tone, "It was a fair question in this situation."

"I... I know" Liara deflated, now looking close to tears "I just..." Then she cleared her throat and seemed to try to don the Broker mask again, not really succeeding "You asked if I was up to be part on the mission. I came to tell you that of course I will join you down there! My combat performance will be unaffected."

"I thought so" the red-head nodded, "Just felt I should make sure."

Liara just hummed and then she said "The rest of the team is already in the shuttle bay, armed and ready."

When the asari turned and took the elevator again Shepard sighed and rubbed her eyes. Then she eyed Trev "You ready?"

"Good to go, I'm just missing the helmet"

"Good. I just have a really bad feeling about this, you know?"

"More than just the fact that the reapers have officially attacked every species of the galaxy?" the blonde cocked her head to the side.

Shepard snorted but nodded "It was Tevos. The whole meeting just rubbed me the wrong way. Also she did say that the matriarchs are getting desperate, that means they don't have any hidden aces. The defense of Thessia is all about brute strength now and they just don't have it."

"Not a good day to be diplomats" Trev nodded, "Not that the STG is of too much use against this enemy."

"Yeah"
"Should we go to the shuttle?" the noble asked.

Shepard nodded "Traynor, keep trying for the scientists. And tell whoever is in charge of that sector we're inbound."

"Aye-aye" the specialist replied. Then she softly added "Good luck."

The other two women smiled at her and called for the elevator to get to the shuttle bay. The whole ground team was already assembled there, everybody in full armor, now only checking their weapons and chatting quietly. All the conversations stopped when Shepard arrived with Trev in tow. When no speech or further briefing was incoming Cortez saluted "The shuttle is ready to go. I've checked everything and all is in working order."

"Excellent" Shepard nodded to him and went to the weapon's rack.

"Make sure to file a report after this mission about the upgrades if there were any. The Alliance wants feedback" Trev reminded.

Vega chuckled "Ah, the wonders of paperwork. Not even war against the ultimate enemy can stop it."

The blonde XO smiled at him sweetly "Indeed. And as the chief of the armory you are required to file a report as well. I know you have been shopping."

"Damn"

"Red tape is what makes the world go 'round, mister Vega" Steve laughed.

"We are on approach" Joker's voice was heard from the ship's intercom.

Cortez hummed to himself and went to his pilot seat followed by Shepard with a helmet under her arm. The rest of the team slowly followed, not really eager to wait in the relatively small space.

"Do we know anything about the Temple of Athame? I tried but it was encrypted though the roof. No chance I could even try in so little time" Miranda said unhappily, not used to failing.

Liara pursed her lips "Benezia took me there once. When I went looking though her files there was a lot on the Temple but it was indeed heavily encrypted. I haven't cracked them yet. But I did find out that it has classified governmental funding. A lot of it."

Shepard nodded "Tevos said only very few people know about this, whatever it is. Only the super high-up. It would make sense Benezia was in the know."

"It seems it's not just a temple" Garrus mused, "Hopefully it will help. You said we are there for a pick up?"

"She said something about an artefact that could help, nothing more. No matter how hard I pressed" the red-head frowned.

"It's no use wondering about it, we'll know soon enough" Tali shrugged.

"You're not curious?" Garrus asked disbelievingly, knowing full well how much of a gossip the quarian was.

"Oh I am but I doubt we'll figure it out by ourselves"
"Hopefully we'll have help" Miranda nodded, casting a glance at Liara that had her head in her hands. The 'hopefully the scientists will be still alive' went unsaid.

The following silence was interrupted by Cortez who half-turned to look at his passengers "Joker gave the go-ahead."

"Then go ahead" Shepard nodded and put her helmet on.

The ride was longer than anticipated and quite bumpy as Cortez had to do a lot of maneuvering to avoid both the reapers in the sky and the ground. Finding a landing, well hovering, spot was especially difficult because of all the rubble and unstable-looking buildings that once formed a great city. The approach to the temple looked particularly bad.

Finally Cortez opened the doors to the shuttle "Make it quick, I can't stay here for too long. Good luck."

"You heard the man" Shepard said and waved to Vega and Trev that were closest to the exit.

The view was… disheartening. The reaper attack was here in full force and the city reflected it. Rubble, fires, dead bodies, signs of chaos and destruction everywhere.

"A lieutenant Kurin is the one in charge according to last reports" Trevelyan informed the commander.

"I think I see her. Or a very bossy asari that the rest is obeying anyway" Shepard shrugged and unfolded her shotgun despite keeping it down in an unthreatening manner.

"Shit, brutes!" Vega cursed making everybody rush towards the small barricade that bisected a large bridge.

The asari didn't question their arrival, just grateful to have some help. Tali hopped on a small platform that held a machine gun as big as her whose previous occupant got downed by a leaping husk. The rest used their own weapons and biotics to clear the path and earn some reprieve.

After the presumed lieutenant Kurin finished shouting orders she turned to the newcomers with a deep frown "You Spectre Shepard?"

"I am" The N7 nodded, "Did you get briefed?"

"No" Kurin glared, "My orders are to hold this position at all costs – and the cost has been high so far. I want to know why we are dying here! This is a lost position, one of the first to be targeted. I have a half-mind to collect my people and retreat. Give me a reason to stay."

"You were given those orders with good reason," Shepard said in an understanding yet firm tone, "Me and my team have to reach the Temple of Athame no matter what. It is the number one priority of this war at the moment."

"That old temple?" the asari gaped, "Pray the goddess what for?"

"Suffice to say it will give us a chance to fight back" Shepard looked the lieutenant right in the eyes despite having her helmet still on, "We, all of us, we need this. We need to reach the Temple and we can't have the reapers on our tail."

Kurin looked over sadly at the barricade that her people were reinforcing "You say we need to stay."
"Yes"

"And this war could be won?"

"Yes" the N7 said sincerely, even if she was more than going on a limb. But Kurin and her squad didn't need to know that. They would most likely die in a few hours and they needed the certainty their sacrifice was worth it.

Kurin nodded "We'll hold. You just make it count, yes?"

"I shall"

Apparently satisfied the lieutenant pointed across the bridge "You'll need to go deeper. There should be two more stations and then an outpost like this one, outpost Tykus. That one is right on the temple's approach. We'll help to make the path clear and serve as a distraction. You should probably hurry up while it's relatively calm. Goddess be with you."

"And you as well" Shepard inclined her head in thanks.

With several harvesters flying in the distance and the big reapers so very close the team made haste across the bridge as they were really exposed on it. They were halfway across when Liara spoke up "I really do hope we make it count."

"Me too" the commander said in a sorrowful tone.

"I think that goes for all of us" Garrus chanced a glance back.

That was pretty much all the time the reapers afforded them to think and attacked swiftly right at the end of the bridge, using a destroyed building and the surrounding rubble as cover while the husks climbed from everywhere.

Liara just blasted them all out with a powerful biotic move only fueled by her anger and grief while the rest of the ground team sniped at the entrenched Marauders. From the sheer number of those it was clear the fights with turians had gone mostly in the reaper's favor.

When the Normandy's crew carefully made their way through a half-collapsed building they all heard the staple scream of a banshee. Fortunately it only met them when they were out of the building and reached a small plaza with a fountain. Normally the plaza would be a beautiful sight and quite an architectural feat but now it was rendered to a mere ghost of what it used to be. It was now littered with fleshy rachni pods and dead bodies upon which the reapers were feasting.

"I think this was one of the stations Kurin was talking about" Miranda said after examining a few of the bodies in a higher spot on the plaza where they had just dispatched several of the rachni-artillery.

"May their souls find rest" Trev said softly.

Vega growled "Where to next?"

EDI pointed at yet another damaged structure "My scan says there is a path through. It is the fastest route."

"Yippee, more tight spaces" Tali grumbled.

"Aren't you used to them?" Miranda arched an eyebrow.

"Doesn't mean I have to like them, cheerleader" the quarian shot back.
Miranda's eyes narrowed "Don't call me that."

"Less talking and more climbing" Shepard called to them from the front.

Garrus chuckled "Well that's new."

"Oh you can talk, just don't argue" the red-head shrugged and vaulted over a large piece of rubble.

Garrus exhaled after a few beats of thinking "I don't have anything. Anyone?"

"Exit ahead" EDI was the only one to speak up.

"Good, I hate this" Vega muttered.

"Claustrophobic?"

"Nah, just don't like the idea I could get killed by a freaking building while war is going on. How pathetic would that be. Not to mention a grave blow to the Alliance's force" the soldier grinned to indicate he was joking.

"Yes Vega, losing you is losing the war" Miranda said in utter deadpan.

A banshee's scream and gunfire interrupted the beginning of conversation. This time the fight was considerably shorter as they received back-up and cover fire courtesy of Kurin's soldiers high up in a sniper's nest.

When the second plaza was reasonably clear Shepard climbed the thin ladder to speak with the asari while the rest of the squad waited below, eyes peeled for any trouble. It paid out as they stopped yet another incursion into the plaza with a few well-places shockwaves and grenades.

When Shepard climbed back her countenance was grim. Liara immediately asked "What is it?"

"They asked me if we really can win this war. All of us are pinning our hopes on an old asari secret and we have absolutely no idea how it's meant to help. Or what it even is. We're racing there blind and leaving them to the reapers"

"Well, this one is definitely too close to comfort" Garrus hummed and looked upwards – they were practically under one of the biggest of the reaper walkers. It just needed to turn to annihilate them all.

Fortunately it seemed busy but it wasn't a happy sight.

"I don't think we can ever be far enough" Tali mumbled at the sight of the massive enemy.

Shepard nodded "Let's go. They said the gardens should be relatively clear and that it would take us to Tykus."

It turned out the gardens were suspended gardens. There was no cover save for a few bushes and not even a railing. It was very clearly not meant for people to trespass on. Thankfully the reapers seemed to take a small break so they only encountered them again almost at the end of the path where there was less chance to go tumbling down all the way down to the ground. That was especially good as the ravagers made their goal to blast everything in sight.

Another enemy that they started encountering more and more were the banshees. Nobody mentioned it but they were all thinking the same thing – with the fresh supply of asari dead there would be even more of them in the future.

The team crossed yet into another area just in time to see a big explosion and a small asari running
out of the resulting flames. The explosion did little to the opposing forces as the reapers were just too many.

Shepard cursed as the reaper barricade was blocking the only visible way forward and to the temple. Trevelyan seemed of a similar mind "There are too many of them, we'll might have to consider an alternative route."

"Kurin had a gunship in repair" Miranda spoke up, "We should ask them for back up."

"With those harvesters around? Not to mention the proper reapers walking about" Garrus cocked his head to the side.

"Let's ask her for the status before we decide anything" Shepard shrugged and continued walking towards the only other organic in sight while laying down suppressive fire.

The asari didn't look up from her reloading "Thanks, I needed a breather."

"Sure. Are you from outpost Tykus?"

"Yeah" the alien snorted, "All what's left. Those fuckers suddenly triplicated and wiped us out."

"I'm sorry to hear that. So I assume where you came from is the path to the temple?" Shepard frowned.

"Yes, we were camped right on the big lane leading to it, it's quite close from here. But no way you can get through now. We used to have air support but the gunships got shot down fast"

"Did you have contact with the scientists?"

The asari nodded "But not recently. I tried but no response."

"Shepard, we will need that air strike" Miranda said again.

Liara's biotic glow faded a little after shooting a warp to detonate her singularity "I agree. Kurin will have to risk it."

"I loathe to agree but I see no choice short of another route" Trev looked questioning at the asari.

"I don't think that's viable, all the other routes will be full of reapers anyway and it would take at least twice as long"

Shepard sighed "Gunships it is then. Can you contact them?"

The asari brought her hand to her ear "This is Tykus. Shepard is here but we are in need of immediate air support."

"…Copy. I'm sending all of them, some will hopefully make it through. Shepard must reach that temple!"

"Now we wait" the asari palmed her weapon again.

The Normandy team nodded, now listening for more than just the gunfire for the reapers. They heard two crashes but then sooner than expected three gunships had made it through, intent on payback and clearing the way.

With a quick thank you to the asari forces the ground team pressed forward before the reapers could
"I recognize it here" Liara spoke up when more of the reaper troops showed up and forced them to slow down, "The temple is close."

"How close? Because I'm almost out of grenades. And I took so many extra I was afraid I could spontaneously combust" Vega asked.

"If I remember correctly then just round the corner" the Broker hummed.

Garrus chuckled "You mean that corner that has two harvesters perched on the rubble?"

"That's the one"

"Awesome" Vega sighed and fished out one of his last grenades.

In the end they didn't have to fight the flying beasts as the two remaining gunships flew by and while did not kill them they lured them away. That left only the 'regular' troops for Shepard & co. to fight.

Finally, finally, the made their way to the large structure that was surprisingly intact. It did make more sense with them knowing that the temple had to have some sort of secret so the building was made more than sturdy. Also it had a power source of its own as there was a brilliant barrier drawn over the entrance acting as its protection.

Tali sheathed her shotgun and immediately approached the only terminal in sight. Liara was quicker "It's a military cypher, I have experience with those."

"Military? That's good news I suppose" Vega squinted, trying to see better through the semi-transparent barrier.

"Highly unusual but in line with what we were thinking. I'd say it helps that not many follow the Athame doctrine anymore, less faithful flocking the shrine" Trev hummed.

"I'm in" Liara announced, her lips forming a tight line.

Right on cue the barrier fell, letting the group inside. Shepard exchanged her shotgun for a less threatening pistol and kept it at her side "Let's see if we can find the scientists. If this place was barricaded they should be around."

The entrance took them into a huge hall with many artefacts on display, all of them in protective cases with plaques underneath. Towering over all that was a massive statue that depicted an asari with two smaller ones facing her. As the team walked towards the main statue, presumably Athame, they all noticed the eerie silence – even the sounds of war from the outside faded away.

"Very shrine-like" Garrus quipped, his voice breaking the silence.

Shepard chuckled "Here I was almost tempted to whisper. Hey, anyone here? Councilor Tevos sent me! Hellooooo?"

"I don't think they're going to answer" Tali motioned for the rest to come her way. At her feet there were four dead unarmored asari.

"This was done by a blade" Trev frowned as she inspected the bodies, "The reapers didn't do this."

"Enemy on the inside? The barrier was up" Vega mused, hefting his weapon up into a more ready position.
"Perhaps an indoctrinated scientist or guard?" EDI proposed.

Miranda hummed "Maybe. What do you think Shepard? … Shepard?"

The red-head was ignoring the conversation and instead was looking around the temple without her pistol up. When she finally noticed everybody was staring at her she actually took off her helmet "It took me a while but I know what this feeling is."

"What feeling?" Miranda frowned.

"I had this weird feeling ever since we entered but it got stronger" Shepard shivered, "There is prothean beacon here."

"WHAT!" Liara exclaimed.

"Are you sure?" Garrus asked in a very serious tone.

"Yes. I already experienced two, I'm sure" the commander said curtly.

Liara shook her head "No, it can't be. You are mistaken."

Miranda scoffed "It makes sense. The asari have been leeching prothean knowledge for centuries if not millenia, that's why they're the most advanced race. And they had the gall to actually make hoarding of prothean knowledge a crime. Typical."

"Like Cerberus wouldn't do the same thing" Tali retorted.

"Of course it would. It goes along the lines of their manifesto, it would not be hypocritical as in this instance. Plus I don't think that Cerberus should be a measuring standard" the former operative shot back.

Shepard looked up at the statue "Well, Tevos did say that the thing here could 'upset balance of galactic power'."

Garrus growled "What can't I forgive is that they still kept it from everybody even after the reapers attacked. If they fessed up sooner we could've… I don't know, but it would've helped! A lot of death could've been prevented."

"You don't know that" their resident asari was quick to retort.

"So where's the beacon?" Vegas asked, ever the practical one.

"I think in or around the statue. There should be some controls or something" the red-head frowned.

EDI cocked her head to the side "There are several VI interfaces. Some of them are connected to the statue of Athame."

"Point the way" Shepard nodded.

As they followed Trev muttered "This whole temple is a front. How sacrilegious."

"A good hiding place though" Miranda shrugged.

As it turned out the hiding place was in fact Athame herself – when the activated all the relevant VI interfaces the statue almost seemed to peel off to reveal the hidden alien device underneath. Now without its cover it seemed to hum with power and glowed in a brilliant green light.
"An active beacon, I can't believe it" Liara whispered.

Shepard spared her a concerned glance but approached the beacon. As soon as she did so the light seemed to intensify and, without even touching anything, a figure appeared.

The prothean apparition looked squarely at the vanguard "You have a piece of us in you but you are not us."

"A VI like Vigil of Ilos" Liara breathed out in awe.

"I think he means the cypher you received on Feros" Garrus mused.

"No matter. Reaper presence detected. This cycle is already on the verge of extinction. Shutting down"

"No, wait!" Shepard exclaimed, "The device, we already built it! But we need to know the catalyst. And what the device is meant to do. And how come you didn't defeat the reapers in your time with it. Anything you know about the reapers is welcome."

The image rippled but stayed "Very well. We are Vendetta, a VI meant to guide the lesser races in the fight against the reapers. The reapers operate in cycles of 50.000 years and..."

"We know that" the Spectre cut it off, "Your device, we need to know about it."

"It is not ours" Vendetta seemed unperturbed by the impatience, "It has been passed down through the cycles. You found it in our archives just as we inherited them from the Inusannon, the dominant species before us. Every cycle that faces the reapers adds to it, improves it, so that the reapers could be destroyed once and for all."

"So it is a weapon" Vega smiled.

"Why are the reapers still around then?" Trev asked.

"We built the device but we never fired it" the prothean replied curtly, "We were sabotaged from the inside by a splinter group that wanted to dominate the reapers rather than destroy them. Later we found out they were all indoctrinated. After we lost the device we pinned our hope on the next cycle. It seems our warnings went unheeded."

"Fuck you too" Vega murmured.

"So what else did we 'miss'?" Miranda pursed her lips.

"We found out that the reapers are merely servants. They obey the will of an unknown master. They will never stop, never reason, never surrender. Their only goal is galactic annihilation. Conventional means will not work"

Shepard rolled her eyes "Yes, that's we're building the Crucible. Now tell us what the Catalyst is."

"Indoctrinated presence detected. Shutting down" Vendetta said once more but this time disappeared for real without giving the crucial answer.

"And we were just getting to the good part" Kai Leng smirked.

"You" Shepard said venomously, not hesitating to bring her pistol up and shooting.

The rest of the team followed but their fire bounced off the barrier formed by his gauntlet and then a
pillar where he hid behind. Over the gunfire he shouted "Somebody wants to talk to you!"

A moment later the squad was shooting through a holographic image of the Illusive Man who was smoking happily "Rude, Shepard. After everything we've been through together."

"Especially after that" the red-head sneered but stopped firing. It wasn't working anyway.

TIM took a drag out of his cigarette and approached the beacon to observe it "I have to give the asari credit. I never thought of this."

"Yay for us" Liara said glacially.

"What do you want" Shepard said in a similar tone.

"Why so hostile commander? After all we both against the reapers" "From where I'm standing it sure doesn't look that way. I want them destroyed"

"Destroying them gains us nothing" the man shook his head in exasperation, "They seek to control us so I say we'll do the same right back!"

"Ya know," Shepard tapped her bottom lip in theatric thought, "Before your lackey got too close, Vendetta was just talking about this prothean splinter group that cost them the war. An indoctrinated splinter group that sought to dominate the reapers. Sounds familiar?"

"Dammit Shepard! Why can't you see this. Just think how much we could do with them in our grasp"

"Go crazy?"

Garrus chuckled "Way past that."

"Just listen to yourself" Miranda shook her head, "You're almost theirs. You already think like them."

Shepard sighed "If you really care about humanity, you stop being the opposition and join us."

"I've already done and sacrificed more for humanity than you'll ever know" TIM sneered but then his face smoothed, "I can see this leads us nowhere. I'll do it alone then, be the guardian to humanity Cerberus always is. Leng, get the data and bring it to me."

"With pleasure" the assassin's words echoed from behind the pillar and the Illusive Man vanished.

Kai Leng sprang into action faster than the rest, his reflexes no doubt artificially augmented by one of his numerous upgrades. His preference for the sword and melee combat meant he had to go close but the Normandy crew had no such compunction. Even despite his advanced shields, armor and his gauntlet Kai Leng would be toast on the spot in not for his ride, a gunship of his own, laying cover fire for him. As such the ground team had to take cover and be extra careful and not just attack head on.

His inhuman agility was Leng’s greatest asset as well as his excellent timing for when his shields dropped. He actually managed to keep the squad at bay for a long time. But if he was good, Shepard was better. In one of the pauses between barrages from the gunship she biotically tackled the wannabe ninja who was too distracted by Trev and Vega to evade. They fell into a heap, their biotics flaring, trying to get the upper hand.
The gunship was of no help and targeted the other members of the team rather than hit their operative. Kai Leng was in trouble anyway as the dog-pile was joined by Liara and Miranda, both of them trying to get shots in. As biotics went against biotics, all four of them were blasted into different directions.

Taking advantage at Leng's lack of shield Trev managed to outrun the gunships pilot's reflexes and run at the ninja, landing a terrifying kick right on his temple.

It had a much smaller effect than anticipated and the operative managed to withstand it and then roll away. He didn't get far because as soon as he stood up Vega caught him in a full body tackle and proceeded to punch his eye-less face in.

Leng got free with a burst of biotics, the energy making the blood on his face float nicely around. In a second Trevelyan was on him again, this time getting him with a good old-fashioned shield bash. As if that wasn't enough for one instance, Tali pumped her shotgun at him several times coupled with Miranda precise pistol shots. Liara catching him with a warp and Shepard arriving in a biotic charge to detonate was almost an over-kill by then.

To be on the safe side, Trev cut the resulting lump into pieces with her sword, showering her armor with gore and not a few electronic components.

Just when their minds caught up to the fact they should be celebrating, the whole temple shook.

It occurred to them all they were left alone by the ship the last few moments yet the sounds of fire hadn't ceased. Now they knew why. The pilot apparently decided Leng was a lost cause and targeted the supports of the temple.

The temple shook again and then the gunship fired the todomé – the missiles. The projectiles arched upwards and went straight for the roof. When the beams and roof came down, the floor gave in and large cracks that quickly widened to holes appeared all around.

The left side of the temple where the team just killed Lang was the first to go, dropping the members several feet down before they all grappled something, trying to come back up.

Garrus was the only one on the right side of the temple, staying behind in his position as sniper, but that side fared better only because its fall came slower. The turian was almost on floor level so he could perfectly see how an EDI-like mech run out from the gunship and straight to the beacon. The centre of the temple that held the treasure must've been especially reinforced, as well as the path to it because the mech didn't have any trouble.

"NO!" Garrus shouted with futility as the TIM's minion sucked out Vendetta and all the precious data.

"Garrus! Are you alright!" Shepard called from the other side and several feet below, thinking his exclamation was because of the fall.

The sniper watched in despair as the mech run back to its ship that took off in an instant. He flailed, trying to get a better perch and grip, slowly and painfully lifting himself back up where the floor was clear of the fallen pillars and general rubble. Realizing he didn't reply to his friend he took off his dented helmet and coughed because of all the dust "Yeah. I'm alright."

"Awesome. Now help us!"

Garrus trudged through the temple to the other side to see a truly frightening crevice – nobody really expected the structure not to be built on solid ground, no matter how the asari like their suspended
architecture.

Liara was highest up, her biotics helped to get a good grip and even help EDI. Once relieved of her burden the asari climbed up without too much trouble. Meanwhile Shepard was in a precarious position as she caught a part of the smooth floor and was trying to hold herself up using its side. Garrus really wasn't in a position to help so Liara pulled her up rather abruptly. Tali was an easy pick up as well but Miranda, Trev and Vega were all much further down. Miranda's left eye was obscured by her blood as a good chunk of rubble caught her in the face and her armor was stained crimson. Despite her visible injuries she was bravely holding on, dangling over the abyss.

After the brunette got the same treatment as Shepard, Liara turned to Trevelyan who managed to either score or climb to an excellent spot on which she could actually stand. When the asari fired up her blue again Trev shook her head and shouted "Wait, I'm alright! Take Vega first, he's… further down."

"I can't see him" Liara shook her head.

"I can see his outline, it doesn't look good" the former templar said in a strained voice.

After a beat Liara bit her lip "I guess I could pull you out and then float myself into your spot and do it from there. But I'm not sure just how much more I can take before I exhaust myself completely. How about you Lawson?"

Miranda looked up to her from her sitting position with one eye, the other was deliberately slathered with medi-gel "I have the juice, but I'm short on depth perception at the moment."

Shepard hummed "Well, I could probably try."

"Not by charge" Garrus' eyes widened, "You'd just destabilize this whole place. I say we're extra-lucky the temple is still holding."

"Of course not by charge you dolt. Although I could probably…"

Liara interrupted "I'm doing it. But If I get stuck down there I'm going to be very upset."

"Roger that" Shepard chuckled.

Getting Trev up and Liara down went seamlessly, it was the other part of the plan that hit a snag. Vega was unconscious, quite deep and under rubble. In the end Liara decided on the brute strength approach and hoping for the best.

Vega was… alive, at least. Other than that there was nothing much positive to say about his condition. EDI took one look at his and declared the need for immediate evac. Nobody protested. That was only after Garrus told them the scope of what happened.

"What do you mean the data's gone!" Shepard growled.

"Cerberus has it. Leng's mech pilot took it all when we were down" the sniper reported sadly.

"So we've got nothing" Miranda declared angrily.

"Yeah"

"Let's… let's just go" the red-head ordered, looking up hatefully at what was remaining of Athame.

"I'll call Cortez" Trev nodded.
"First things first. There are reapers amassed in front of the temple again" Garrus spoke up, palming his secondary weapon, his trusty sniper lost in the fall.

"Why didn't they come inside?"

"I guess they thought we're killing each other well enough by ourselves" Tali casted a glance at Vega's still body.

"Yeah. They aren't wrong about that" Shepard bared her teeth.

Miranda nodded "The Illusive Man is going down."

Chapter End Notes

AN: So I killed Kai Leng. Just no way he could hold his own against the whole team. Still, the data was lost. You all know what that means – the horrors of Sanctuary are next.
AN: You know what, I don't like that the Relays mean near-instantaneous travel. Well at least to Relay systems. It means we have to jump straight to Sanctuary in this one and deal with all the emotions later.

"You know, with all your miraculous modern medicine one would say the process of resetting a dislocated shoulder would be more advanced than in Thedas"

"Don't be a baby" Chakwas smirked and jerked the hand back in place getting a muffled but clearly pained sound in return, "Beside, if our medicine was any less miraculous and modern we would've lost Vega."

Trev looked at the only truly occupied bed in the Med-bay where a heavily sedated Vega was resting. Garrus seemed of a similar mind and asked "How long?"

"He'll need to go to Huerta" the doctor sighed, "But he should be ok in time. How much time I can't say – I don't know the state the hospital's in."

"With the new wave of refugees, this time from Thessia it'll be some time" Shepard said in a low voice and stood up, "So, everyone's alright doc?"

"You saw the damage" Chakwas shrugged, "Apart from Vega everyone is more or less ready for more action. But I would advise some rest, even if that advice is going to be disregarded."

The red-head looked around the room – Vega was incapacitated, Trev had a dislocated shoulder that would need some rest, Miranda was sporting a brand new scar and half of her face was really touchy even if her eye would be fine, Garrus had some ribs broken and Tali was pumped with antibiotics from where her suit ruptured during the fall. Only herself and Liara, and of course EDI, were uninjured. She sighed once more "When you are able gather in the War Room, we need to determine what's next. I… I'm going to brief Tevos and Hackett."

Everybody nodded solemnly, glad that wasn't their job.

Shepard swiftly left the Med-Bay and headed to the QEC. She still didn't know what to say to them. They lost big time and the situation seemed hopeless. She still could hear the asari voices on the radio, all dying, hoping their sacrifice meant Shepard and her team got the information. The information they lost to Cerberus.

Traynor already had the Councilor queued up but Shepard didn't press the connecting button. She paced in front of it, trying to find the words. And to calm her anger and her feeling of failure. Finally she took one deep breath and connected.

"Commander" Tevos greeted immediately, "How soon can we finish the Crucible?"

Shepard blinked, torn between being flattered and absolutely incensed. She settled on simplicity "We were late. Cerberus got there before us. We didn't get the data from the beacon."
"What!" the asari exclaimed, "How could that happen!"

"How they get the information I have no idea, all I know that the scientists you told us to greet were long dead when we arrived on the scene. And then we had a nice chat with the Illusive Man."

"Cerberus!" Tevos growled, "You humans should've brought them to heel years ago!"

"Are we really doing this Miss-I-Had-a-Beacon-Stashed-in-My-Temple?"

Tevos seemed to deflate, anger giving way to utter sadness and despair "No, I apologize. I... I just hadn't expected... I was so sure we could... No matter now, I need to attend to things now with our retreat. I... I hope you'll find a way forward nonetheless. Goddess be with you."

Without even waiting for a reply back the QEC disconnected. Shepard didn't begrudge her at all, she was angry as well. To think the Illusive Man would go so far as to steal their best chance at ending this war... No, this ends now. Cerberus needed to go down once and for all.

Once Shepard was done talking to Hackett she stomped into the War Room, already finding the rest on her team in there, looking at something EDI had out on the holographic display. All eyes rose to look at the commander. Shepard inspected the display "What do you have here?"

Everybody turned to Traynor who cleared her throat uncomfortably "Well, I had an idea."

"An excellent one" Miranda dispensed one of her very rare praises, "And she actually made it work."

"EDI helped" Sam retorted quickly.

"Not really" the AI replied.

"That's all nice and well but I'd like to hear what this idea is" Shepard interjected.

"Right, hm" Traynor nodded, "So I was able to sort of track the shuttle Kai Leng came in. There is a lot of movement but the signal disappeared in the Iera system. BUT. It didn't just disappear, it is actively blocked. Something is actively interfering with all communications in that region of space. If a Cerberus mech or whoever has the data, I'd say it might try to get it to TIM directly. Or someone high in the chain of command. It's a slim lead but I think it is one."

"Yes, it is definitely worth investigating. Great job Traynor" the red-head smiled but her countenance is still grim.

"What is it?" Garrus asked.

Shepard didn't answer just used her chin to point at Liara. While the asari was physically present it was clear her mind is far away, most likely Thessia. Garrus shook his head "It happened and it was hardly our fault."

"I'd say the leak came from the Citadel, I have no doubt that they couldn't find everything Cerberus hacked during the coup" Miranda added.

"We should've secured the gunship" Shepard growled.

"After Kai Leng gave us the slip on the Citadel we went all out. It was logical" Trevelyan countered.

"If anything I would blame asari architecture" Tali said sternly, "Now let's stop this pity party and let's move onto action!"
Trev glanced at her injured lover "We're hardly in top shape. If we really found the Cerberus' main base…"

"I don't think it's a main base" Sam looked down at her projection, "Iera is home to Sanctuary, the refugee camp at Horizon. It's just too frequented and must be guarded as well. It was probably just a stop, but an important one. We should pursue or we risk losing the trail."

Shepard hummed "I agree, we must press on. After we investigate we will take the time to heal fully. But for now, who of you Chakwas, albeit reluctantly, cleared for duty?"

"I'm good" Tali shrugged, "The suit is needs patching up but I can do that in a jiffy. I'm pumped with antibiotics but it shouldn't hinder me."

Miranda cast a glance at Trev who nodded "We're good too. I might pick a full-faced helmet this time though."

"If I don't run full sprint all the time I'm released as well" Garrus reported, "We all need new gear though. I think pretty much everybody lost their weapons."

The red-head sighed "Yeah, that's true. Fortunately we have extra. So, to sum it up everybody's in except for Vega and we'll have to be careful. Not the state I'd like to be fighting Cerberus in but I'll take it."

"Not that you have much choice" Miranda shrugged.

Shepard rolled her eyes and turned to EDI "To Iera then."

"I have informed Joker"

"Back in armor then I guess. Oh and Sam? Great work"

/ 

"I think we're in the right place after all" Garrus announced, nudging the dead Cerberus Phantom with his foot. 

"What was your first clue, the rubble, the fires or the snipers?" Tali snarked and moved to hack to doors.

"I'm going to go with the snipers"

"Good choice!"

Miranda rolled her eyes and turned to Shepard "And communications. The comms are out. Completely. This isn't good."

The red-head was looking around, her posture stiff "No kidding. But we're here to see if this is some kind of secret facility or what. As for refugee camp, I don't think it is one anymore. Between Cerberus and the reapers."

"People flocked here with hope in their hearts and ended up as a big target and nothing else" Miranda nodded sadly.

"Traynor is from Horizon. Her parents still live here"

"Oh"
"Oh" Shepard repeated in a hard voice.

"You think…"

"Wouldn't you have gone to Sanctuary?"

"Well, no. Not really"

"Let's hope the Traynors are as careful as you"

Both women heard a low whistle, courtesy of Garrus and hurried through the open doors. What was supposed to be a nice and clean reception and entry hall was littered with Cerberus and reaper bodies. Trevelyan was kneeling beside yet another phantom "It was time they started killing each other. But it doesn't really work. We know TIM is indoctrinated, even Vendetta confirmed it more or less. Why then?"

"My bet it has something to do with why we are here" Garrus mused.

"Sanctuary has several separate systems, I can only access the one that is used here" EDI informed.

"Anything?" Shepard was quick to ask.

"There is a lot of damage, but what I can read is disturbing" the AI reported.

"How so?" Liara asked, talking for the first time since touching the ground.

"They were sorting the refugees" EDI continued, "Here - Civilian processing ratios: adults 60% sent to integration, children 85% sent to integration; suitable candidates are being assigned to temporary living areas in alphabetical order. Family units are being preserved for ease of processing."

"That is peculiar" Trev mused, "What about the remaining 55%? Sent away?"

"I don't know, but it doesn't sound good at all" Shepard frowned.

"We need to get to the more secure part of this place, the one that runs out of sight. EDI should be able to access a new system there and we might finally get some answers" Miranda proposed.

Everybody nodded and moved as one to the stairs that led to a lower level – Sanctuary was only two floors above ground, discounting the communications tower, so anything hidden had to be down. They passed another landing zone and then they chose the doors with the highest security mechanism. Tali worked in silence, not caring that this particular room was witness to a bloodbath some time earlier. Again both Cerberus and reaper bodies were everywhere, thankfully not moving. No civilians.

When the doors were breached they all blinked in confusion – after something that was clearly a storage room there was an entrance to a pool. A small platform, a lot of water and a surprisingly pleasant view full of vegetation.

"One moment" EDI announced, making the team sigh in relief that there was something. After a small moment at a nearby terminal EDI started to drain the pool "The lower levels can be accessed through here."

"Good catch" Shepard nodded.

As they waited for the operation to be complete Garrus spoke up "So, why a pool? Any ideas?"
Trevelyan hummed "It does seem needlessly elaborate."

"It does give the 'evil lair' feeling. We might get a bona fide Bond villain on the other end" Shepard smirked.

"James Bond? Really Shepard?" Miranda arched an eyebrow.

"What, being in jail gets boring"

"But I bet you still didn't see Fleet and Flotilla" Tali crossed her arms.

"Nah, but it's on my list. Right between learning to sew and becoming a ventriloquist"

"Shepard…"

"Tali. It's mushy. More than. I did see the 'famous' scene on the extranet, the one with 'dust in the solar wind' and whatever. I was genuinely worried my teeth would rot"

"It's a classic!"

"Classic what exactly?"

Trev cleared her throat "The pool is drained and I see something quite resembling reaper tech."

"What!"

"Trev is right, it looks familiar" Garrus nodded.

"Approximately 72% match to known reaper structures" EDI confirmed.

"Oh boy” Shepard sighed.

The team descended one by one via a small ladder into the former pool and then beyond via a heavily armored, and of course pressurized, doors. Everybody was on the lookout for any terminal so that they could find answers but it seemed the secret facility was at minimum power or some kind of emergency mode. Finally they found something like a command center that still had enough juice to run computers.

Tali cursed "Shepard, I found video logs of the 'research' here. I can scarcely believe it."

"Play it" the commander nodded as the team gathered around the terminal.

Tali played it.

Then another and another.

"So" Shepard said finally in a deceptively calm voice, "Cerberus is making their own husks. Out of colonists lured here by the promise of safety. The fact TIM just a few hours spoke protecting humanity is irony at its finest."

"A reaper factory" Miranda whispered in an almost disbelieving tone.

"There is more" EDI spoke up.

"Apart from the fact the husks the reapers broke out and are all around this facility eating everything in sight? Of course there is" Garrus sighed.
"The aim of Sanctuary was to replicate the reapers signal, the one that is controlling the troops" the AI reported. "It is a project directly under the Illusive Man's supervision. Although the one in charge here, and lead scientist, is Henry Lawson."

"Need I ask if there is any relation?" Tali turned to the former Cerberus operative.

Shepard glared at the quarian, making her to shut up. Then she asked gently "Miranda?"

The brunette opened her eyes abruptly, having closed them a moment before, and said eagerly "Is he here? Is he still here?"

"It appears so" EDI nodded, "The mech we are chasing appears to be sent here to retrieve this data as well. I doubt it means retrieving Henry Lawson too."

"Heh" Miranda smirked.

"The mech is still here? Excellent. We pursue. We need Vendetta at all costs" Shepard declared and hefted her shotgun, "On the double people."

"And through the sea of husks" Garrus sighed.

"Same old, same old" Trev chuckled.

Without further ado the Normandy crew entered the lock-down area, getting mobbed by husks right off the bat. Shepard just tore through them and proceeded onward, eager to rectify their failure form Thessia.

Husks were everywhere. Sanctuary was a big place and the promise of safety attracted a lot of refugees – even if you considered not everyone was 'processed' or 'survived' the huskification procedure, it was still a lot of troops. Most disturbing were those that couldn't enter the particular room the team was in so the crawled over the glass like some kind of insects. Or arachnids, as punctuated by Shepard's half singing, half mumbling 'Spiderman, Spiderman, does whatever a spider can', getting irritated looks from the rest.

"This terminal might contain additional information. It is not connected to the rest" EDI called from behind the group, making them stop. A moment later EDI cocked her head to the side "Personal logs from one of the scientists."

"Anything of use?" Trev asked.

"Very. TIM asked for 'samples' of indoctrinated population to be sent to him. If it indeed means to him in person we have a possible way to determine his base of operations"

"Excellent!" Shepard brightened up considerably, "Collect all the data you can. But first we need to get back the data on the Catalyst. Any idea about the mech's whereabouts?"

"The data on the reaper signal would most probably be with the lead scientist"

"And where he might be?" Miranda asked sweetly.

"Communications tower has the highest security protocol"

"Upwards we go"

It wasn't that easy. It turned out that Cerberus processed more than just human refugees but that they didn't discriminate in the least. Banshees, marauders, heck even ravagers and brutes stood in their
way to the comm tower. The brutes were especially dangerous as most of the team members were trying to be careful and not to aggravate their health. Also being a man down wasn't helpful at all, especially since Vega was a heavy.

In one of the rooms they had to entrench themselves for a while the log was on and going on a loop. As the team battled the reapers they had to listen to the fascination of a random researcher about Dragon Teeth – the machine that produced husks. He was quite thorough and quite knowledgeable about biology and chemistry as well as engineering.

Finally Tali got disgusted enough and ordered her drone to fire at the terminal rather than the enemies.

"Thank the spirits! That was awful" Garrus exhaled in relief when the recording finally stopped playing.

"Disgusting" Liara agreed.

"Good thinking Tali" Trev nodded.

"Is it bad I kinda hope this person got eaten?" Shepard hummed.

"Bosh'tets. All of them"

Miranda exhaled loudly and shook her head "All this makes me all the more ashamed of sharing my last name with… him."

"That part is easily fixed" Trev shrugged, "You could always take mine."

As the team stood speechless for several beats, Tali crossed her arms "If that was meant to be a proposal, it was the worst in recorded history. Not romantic at all. Even the cheerleader deserves better."

Trevelyan suddenly found herself at the center of intensive scrutiny from the entire ground team. She cleared her throat in embarrassment "I… well. It had been on my mind recently and now it kind of… slipped?"

Shepard took off her helmet so that the former templar could see her pursed lips and arched eyebrow. When Trev gulped, the red-head pointed to the floor "Kneel and do it properly."

Miranda laughed "Leave her be. It just slipped. And this floor is smeared by reaper guts."

"No! That wasn't what I meant!" Trev shook her head vigorously, "I did plan on it. Well, now right now obviously., Just you know, thinking. With the war and such. And I love you so… And I'm rambling. I can't believe I'm rambling. I don't ramble."

"You kinda do" Garrus stage-whispered.

"Yeah. Right" Trevelyan cleared her throat again. Then she did kneel and hurriedly took off her gloves and visor.

"Are we really doing this?" Miranda arched both eyebrows in question.

"Hush" Shepard waved her off, "Be romantic."

"Reaper guts. Romantic"
"Lawson…"

Miranda shook her head in exasperation. Then she turned to her kneeling lover who had a hopeful look about her. She sighed and carefully took off her new helmet.

"HA! She's blushing! I knew it!" Garrus clapped his hands in glee.

"Let's hurry up, we have a mission" the brunette eyed him sternly.

"You sure about this? She's not much of a romantic" Tali looked at Trev.

"If you actually let me do this you might find out" Trev hissed.

"Right. Sorry. Proceed"

In the ensuing silence Trevelyan cleared her throat once again "So, eh."

"Great start"

The blonde ignored Shepard and continued "You're right, we have a mission so I'll be brief. Will you marry me?"

"Fleet and Flotilla did it better"

EDI elbowed the quarian "I want to hear the answer."

Miranda chuckled but was still looking at Trev "Really? You're not doing it just because Tali and Shepard would rip you apart?"

"Of course not. We spent almost the entire year living together and now I can't think I could ever wish to be apart from you. I love you"

"See, better"

"Tali"

"Well then" Miranda nodded, "Yes. I will marry you. I think nobility will suit me."

"I think so too" Trevelyan grinned broadly and rose up, "And I am sorry I don't have a ring or anything."

The brunette pecked her lover's lips briefly and put her helmet back on "I think I will survive. Now, let's kill my father."

"You mean collect his data" Shepard chuckled.

"Sure. That too. Think of it as a wedding present"

Tali snorted "Fitting."

"Hey, that's my future wife you are talking about"

"And your father-in-law we are about to kill"

"Oh shit! Oriana!"

Miranda looked up alarmed "What about her?"
"I didn't ask permission"

The former operative rolled her eyes and motioned to Shepard to lead the way again. The commander shrugged "Let's just use this thingy to get to that platform and to the elevator."

"Congratulations" EDI was the first to offer once they stepped into the elevator that would take them to the top of the comm tower. She was quickly followed by the rest and a surprisingly teary eyed Shepard who decided to go full-on wedding planner. And calling dibs on the maid of honor.

Only their approaching stop returned the group into the calm professional they were.

The elevator didn't 'ding' when it reached the top. The doors opened unceremoniously only to reveal an impeccably dressed man with a pistol aimed in their direction.

Shepard was the first to react "Soooo, no mech?"

"No, it's been gone a while after robbing my databanks" the man growled.

While the red-head cursed Miranda grinned, her pistol up "Hello father. Goodbye father."

"Wait! I have information!"

Garrus snorted "Yeah, we're not really interested in making husks out of our own people."

"The mech, you want it. I know how to find it" Henry Lawson smiled confidently.

"Ho?"

"The Illusive Man double-crossed me so I made some arrangements" senior nodded, "I planted a tracker that won't be discovered. You can follow it right to the Illusive Man. So what do you say? Me instead of him. You let me go and I give you the frequency."

"EDI, can you hack it?" Shepard asked, making Henry frown and grip his gun tighter.

"Cannot say. But Mr. Lawson probably has the receiver on his person.

"Sounds good to me" Miranda smiled and shot her father three times into his head in a rapid succession.

The commander sighed "Next time wait on my instruction."

"Best gift ever"

"Is she drunk?" Garrus leaned towards Tali, "She's… smiling!"

"She just committed patricide, of course she's smiling" the quarian replied with almost fond sarcasm.

"I have the receiver" EDI announced after frisking the fresh corpse.

"Is the information good?" Shepard asked with hope clear in her voice.

"It will be. My father knew how to hold a grudge" Miranda smirked, kneeling to take her father's omnitool.

Liara smirked briefly as well "It means we have a way forward. To reclaim the Catalyst, kill Cerberus and end this war."
"Just like we promised on Thessia" Shepard smiled at her ex.

"We should go and activate the tracker immediately" Trev hummed, "If this is indeed THE base we need to report this to Hackett and prepare."

"Agreed" Miranda nodded.

"But first we kill this place with fire" Garrus reminded.

"Shouldn't we broadcast that sanctuary is no more? So refugees won't come here?" Tali hummed.

Shepard's face hardened "I'll talk to Allers. The reapers destroyed Sanctuary."

"The reapers?" Miranda half-asked.

"The reapers"
The ground team was eagerly waiting on their commander to finish talking with admiral Hackett on the QEC. The room was completely silent as the squad was awaiting the news. Also the war room was empty apart from them, not wanting to risk any possible Cerberus moles that somehow passed their screening to overhear – if this was mean to be the final offensive against the human terrorist organization they needed the element of surprise.

Finally Shepard descended the three small steps and leaned on the war table. Garrus unfolded his arms and asked "Well?"

"We have two days" the red-head announced, "And then we move. Hackett is surreptitiously mobilizing the fleet now but it will catch the reaper's attention as well. So the plan is assault Cerberus, take the Catalyst info, and then move the Crucible and all available ships to Earth."

"Wow… already" Sam murmured wide-eyed.

"It really is not but I understand how you feel" Trevelyan nodded.

"So the Crucible is finished?" Liara said sharply.

Shepard hummed "Except for the Catalyst, yes. We still don't really know what it does but Vendetta helped settle that fear, it really should destroy the reapers."

"In theory" Miranda couldn't help herself.

"All evidence points to the affirmative" EDI retorted a bit chidingly.

"It doesn't matter right now, we are committed" Shepard declared, "We have two days downtime. Everybody go to Chakwas again and get checked out and listen to her instructions to the letter. We will need to be in top shape. Rest up."

"Should I input the Citadel's coordinates?" EDI asked.

The Spectre thought for a moment "No. We will resupply via the Fifth Fleet right before the attack. Cerberus surely has surveillance on the Citadel, I don't want to tempt anything."

"And Vega?" Trev arched an eyebrow.

"I'll have Chakwas contact Heurta to get an update. But I don't think he will be joining us. At least before the final push on Earth" Shepard frowned. Then her expression eased "So, two days. You may go. We might not get anymore rest before the war is over so I suggest making the most of it. I'm going to contact Anderson and when I'm back you all better be with Chakwas or resting."

"Aye aye" Garrus chuckled.

/ 

"Liara?" Shepard called into the darkened room, the usual monitors dimmed and the asari that manned them nowhere to be seen.

"Over here" Liara replied after a moment, obviously till then undecided whether to speak up or not.

Shepard let the doors close behind her and walked further into the cabin and behind a small partition
that covered part of the bedroom space of the office. Liara was half-sitting, half-lying on armchair with datapads all around her.

"Busy? I thought I ordered rest" the red-head said mildly and sat down on the only other available seat.

"I am resting. But while I do so I'm also helping the refugees. Mainly from Thessia" Liara's eyes were glistening with tears, "Our home planet. We lost it. Abandoned it. If only they told! Maybe we could've… And Benezia knew! Ha, how she must've laughed when I told her I wanted to be an archeologist with focus on Protheans. What a joke."

"Hardly" Shepard touched Liara's arm gently.

"She took me to that temple. What was that other than a taunt" the asari wiped her eyes aggressively.

"I think she hoped one day you would return to see it in full. Besides, other than the Beacon it had plenty other prothean and asari relics, maybe she just wanted to make you happy"

Liara snorted "Yeah. Right."

"Did you contact Aethyta?"

"I haven't. She said she would be incommunicado for a while and that she would contact me when she could"

"No more bartending?"

"No more bartending" Liara laughed despite herself.

Shepard sighed theatrically "Pity that. She made a mean drink."

"Do you think she knew? About the Beacon?"

"No idea" the red-head shrugged, "I don't know much about her, that is more your line of expertise."

"Hm" Liara looked down at her datapads on the ground. She sighed and forced herself to change the subject "Anyway, how come you're not with specialist Traynor? I would've though your 'resting time' would be spent with her."

"She said she's still on shift and that she will meet up with me later" Shepard said with a lightness that didn't seem in place.

"I know about her being from Horizon"

"What!" the Spectre exclaimed but then shook her head "Of course you know. And of course you ran background checks on the whole crew."

"We might be no longer together but I did want to check her out. Well, more thoroughly than the rest" the Broker smiled.

Shepard nodded tightly where she would normally chuckle and instead asked "Do you know if her family went to Sanctuary?"

Liara gently touched her ex's arm "I'm sorry, I don't know. I don't think we can ever know for sure unless Traynor manages to somehow get in touch with them. I'd bet that is half of what she's doing right now apart from working with Hackett's team."
"Her parents were, I mean *are* civilians" the red-head bit her lip at her hasty correction, "It would make sense if they sought safety. Especially after the Collector attack last year."

"It would"

"Yeah"

After a beat of silence Liara almost-smirked "Well, if you have come to me for cheering up I fear I have failed."

Shepard chuckled wryly "No, I came to cheer *you* up. And I have definitely failed."

The asari shook her head "I am devastated about Thessia but even more angry. I have been warning my people for four years and they did not listen. Not a word. I don't think anything can really cheer me up. Although destroying Cerberus might help a smidgen."

"We have waited long enough on that. That dog needs to be put down already"

"Agreed. But enough about all this. I don't want to commiserate nor dwell on all this if you don't mind. If we could speak of something else"

Shepard nodded in understanding and after a moment a slow smile made her way onto her face "Well there always is the Trevelyan wedding."

Liara laughed "Yes, I almost forgot. A spark of light in all this darkness. It was actually quite adorable."

"I totally knew Trev is the marrying kind. Didn't think Miranda was though. She did mellow out a lot with her though" the red-head grinned.

"Quite so"

"Trev seemed a bit spooked when I told her I had a plan already" Shepard tapped her lip.

The broker bit her lip to prevent herself from laughing "A plan? For *her* wedding?"

"Hey, I am the maid of honor!"

"So far I only remember you shouting 'dibs' and then speaking so fast I couldn't follow. No wonder Trevelyan is spooked"

Shepard just humphed "Details. So, I was thinking that Hackett would officiate…"

"Yes, he has a lot of free time these days"

The red-head naturally ignored her friend and continued "… and I think Trev will actually ask EDI to stand with her, but Miranda will totally go for me. The colors are obvious – green and gold, the Trevelyan colors. Setting the date might get a liiiitlile bit tricky with all those pesky reapers around, so I was thinking…"

Liara shook her head fondly. Count on Shepard to somehow convince her the future will be just glorious enough to support a big white wedding free of any worries. And soon. It was one of the more endearing qualities of the human – no matter what the reality was she made you believe.

"So what do you think?"
"Sounds good" the asari shrugged.

"Well that sounded just like a 'yes, dear' if I ever heard one"

"Hm?"

"Meanie"

"Sorry, but did you speak with the happy couple about this?"

"I am the maid of honor" Shepard frowned in confusion.

"So no"

"Is that relevant?"

/Trevelyan shivered suddenly and frowned. Miranda turned to her "What is it?"

"Just had a bad feeling"

"Reaper-wise?"

"Shepard-wise"

The brunette sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose "I bet it's the wedding again. She's relentless."

"True" Trev nodded, "But we are agreed to wait after the war, right?"

"Well, I'm not doing it in the QEC suite" Miranda arched an eyebrow.

"Just checking"

"Good, so I'm going back to work"

The former templar narrowed her eyes "We are to be resting. Especially your eye."

Miranda rolled both of them "My eye is fine. And besides, I just delegated – I found out another Cerberus operation which we won't be shutting down. I'm letting Hackett's N7 teams handle it. See, resting."

"And now?" Trev wasn't convinced.

"Now I am trying to get in touch with Oriana" the operative said pointedly, "I think she deserves to know about our father's fate, don't you?"

"Of course" the blonde relented, "Might want to mention the engagement too."

"Oh. Right"

Trev chuckled "Ahh, not even married yet and the bliss is here."

"Her safety is a priority. I'm sure I would've remembered eventually" Miranda smirked and caught her fiancé's lips in a quick kiss. Then she returned to her console and resumed her typing.
"I am certain" the noble shook her head with a chuckle, "I'm betting the first thing she mentions is your new scar. Which I still don't understand why Chakwas didn't heal."

"I already explained it to you. Besides, it's really faint and she won't notice"

"It's a bet then" Trev hummed and inspected her lover's face – it was faint, a pale white line running from temple to cheek, but it was very clear just how close Miranda came to losing an eye.

"Stop looking at it" the operative said sharply, "You said it looked dashing. Although you said the same thing about Garrus' so I'm not convinced."

"Come on, his scar is panty-dropping" Trevelyan winked.

"You have been hanging out with Shepard again, haven't you" Miranda laughed.

"I seem to remember you yourself have said on many occasions that my vernacular needs updating"

"Yes, but 'panty-dropping' isn't what I had in mind exactly"

The noble smirked mischievously and sauntered towards her lover "You know, that is exactly what I had in mind."

"But Oriana…"

"Can wait" Trev announced and hovered over the sitting brunette to catch her in a searing kiss. Then realizing the uncomfortable position she decided to test the maximum capacity of the chair and straddled Miranda, connecting their lips once more. The brunette's protests were forgotten as they lost themselves in the action.

"Hm, guys? You called me. I hope this isn't what for" an amused voice spoke from the terminal.

Miranda almost jumped up, dislodging the Andrastian, and cleared her throat awkwardly "That's what I was trying to tell you, Trev."

"Reeeeeeally, because it sure didn't looked like it from here" Oriana grinned on the screen.

The noble sighed and hid her face in the crook of her lover's neck "Hello Oriana."

"Helooo Trev"

"Yes, hello Ori" Miranda shooed Trev from her lap, "I wasn't sure I could even get through. Especially on such encrypted channel. I'm glad I did. I have news."

The younger sibling sighed dramatically "Why is it you never call just to say hi. It's always 'news'. So what is it this time? You have time to make out so I guess father isn't hot on my heels?"

"He isn't" Miranda grinned so widely it must've hurt, "He's dead. It's over."

"Oh" Oriana blinked, "Well, that's good."

"I thought you'd be happier" the operative's smile dimmed.

"Miri, to me he was just some villain I never saw. Oh I know the threat was real, but abstract. But I am glad. Mainly for you" Oriana smiled, "And that we can now meet up for real. I really am happy about that."
Miranda nodded albeit a bit disappointedly "You're right, it was my obsession, not yours."

"I think you can be proud he remained abstract for Oriana. It means you did protect her just like you promised yourself" Trev added.

"Yes, you did. Thank you" the younger sister smiled, "For everything." Miranda smiled right back, quite moved. Oriana hummed and continued "And I especially thank you for the work you got me. There is this handsome engineer, we worked together on the Crucible that…"

"Easy" Trev smirked as she noticed her lover go several shades paler, "You might break your sister."

"You're too young to date!" Miranda exclaimed.

"I'm twenty" Oriana rolled her eyes.

"What's this engineer's name?"

"So you can do a background check? Nope"

"Ori!"

"Miri!"

"Ladies" Trev intervened, "How about we move onto the second news on the list before I leave you to catch up alone."

"Sure, but don't leave. You're practically family" Oriana winked.

Miranda took several breaths to calm down and force the dread of some engineer defiling her little sister out of her mind. Trev beside her was wearing a beaming smile so it wasn't that hard. She smiled and turned to Oriana "You're more right that you know. After all she is your future sister-in-law."

"You're engaged?!" the younger sibling practically squealed, "That's amazing! Who asked who? Show me the ring! When's the wedding? Oh my god, oh my god, Miri, you're getting married!"

"I think she is more excited then you are" Trev chuckled, "By a lot."

"I admit the idea of marriage isn't a big deal to me. But the implicit promise of never leaving me is. But I don't squeal. Never" Miranda sought Trev's hand and smiled reassuringly.

"Really? And here I thought you were marrying me just for the title" the blonde chuckled.

"Lady Miranda Trevelyan does have a nice ring to it"

"Speaking of ring…" Oriana chimed in, eyes sparkling eagerly.

Trev blushed and rubbed the back of her neck "Well, you see…"

"She didn't give me one" Miranda smirked as she tattled, "And the proposal was lacking too."

"Was not!" the blonde exclaimed, "I did it properly! ...in the end."

Oriana pursed her lips and tapped her nails on the table she had before her "Trevelyan…"

Miranda was all too happy to throw her fiancé under the bus "So let me tell you how it happened…"
Trev just whined in embarrassment. She would never live that down, she could feel it.

"Specialist Traynor"

"Yes, EDI?"

"You told me to remind you when your shift is over"

"Ah" Sam muttered and let her hands drop away from her console, looking at it sadly.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing I would want to discuss in the open"

"Acknowledged"

The specialist bit her lip "I will be going to the mess hall to grab something to eat. Your platform could come by if you like"

"… I will be there"

Traynor secured her station and transferred several notifications for specialist Chang who had the next shift in communications. With that done she sighed once more and made her way to the elevator. As she rode a floor down her stomach loudly reminded her that she was in fact quite hungry.

EDI somehow materialized at her side right as she entered the mess hall. At Sam's startled jump she explained "I was in Life Support."

"Why?" the brunette asked bewildered.

"I sought time apart from Jeff"

"Joker? Did he finally get on your nerves too?" Traynor chuckled as she inspected the available meals.

"No. But he initiated what I can only qualify as romantic overtures"

Sam turned to the bot, her eyes involuntarily pausing at the chest area, and arched both eyebrows "Joker? Asked you out?"

"No, but I am 89% sure of his interest" EDI announced.

"And that interest is unwelcome?"

"Jeff is a good friend"

"Ouch"

"You are hurt specialist?" EDI asked with concern.

Sam chuckled "No. Just, well, it doesn't matter. So what did he say?"

"I thought we were going to talk about your sighing over your console"
"Is this you telling me to stop nosing and change the subject?"

"Not precisely"

"Ah" Traynor laughed, "Very well. By the way you I have noticed you have grown so much, even during my time here. No wonder Joker made 'overtures'."

"Thank you"

"I promise to stop talking about this but just let me ask – why not Joker? He's the only one of the crew you call by their first name"

"He's the only one to ask him to call him by his first name. Well, Trev did share hers but asked not to use it as she prefers her nickname"

The brunette cocked her head to the side "You can call me Sam. Or Samantha."

"I shall then. Now, Sam, will you tell me what is wrong?" EDI's bot arched an eyebrow in a very human fashion.

Traynor sighed "And here we were having a nice distracting conversation. But you're right."

Since the specialist didn't continue EDI had to prompt her "Yes?"

"I… It's my parents" Sam said finally in a tight voice, "I was searching for them, to know for sure whether they are alive somewhere or… I didn't manage to contact them. Quite some time already but communication is hard these days. But after Sanctuary… I wanted to be sure. Finally I promised myself that if I couldn't find them until end of shift today… I would stop trying. At least until the war is over."

"I understand. I am unsure if it is appropriate to offer but I have collected a lot of data from Sanctuary. If you wish I could try to find the identities of the refugees, if in fact Cerberus retained such lists, and cross reference it with your file"

Traynor hesitated but then she nodded firmly "Yes. Please. I want to be sure. Either way. Thank you EDI."

"You are welcome"

The next few minutes were spent by Sam eating what passed for rations these days while EDI watched her while internally sifting through the data from Sanctuary. It was when Traynor was finished and was gulping down a large glass of water when EDI's lips parted in a small "Oh".

"What is it?" the brunette asked, her throat tight.

"I am sorry Samantha. I did find them."

"In the Sanctuary files?"

"Yes"

"So they are… are… husks?" Traynor's eyes glistened but she refused to let her tears fall.

"They were not sent to 'processing'" EDI seemed lost on how to comfort her friend, "But they have been in Sanctuary."
"So they killed them outright? That's... well, that might be better. So they are... dead?" Sam's voice broke at the last word.

"In all probability, yes"

"Oh"

"I'm sorry"

The human shook her head "Thank you EDI. I wanted to know so now I know. Please excuse me."

"Of course" EDI-bot watched as her friend made her way towards the elevator, forgetting her tray behind. She collected it as she watched with her internal sensors as Sam pressed the button for Shepard's cabin. The specialist remained composed right until the moment she fell into the commander's arms. EDI stopped watching after that. It didn't seem appropriate.

Still, all the races were so afraid of AI, afraid they could become monsters as they did not feel emotions then same way as organics. After the lie that was Sanctuary, EDI felt anger at their hypocrisy. She also felt gratitude though, grateful for the fact her cry of help on Luna so long ago had been heard and that it led her here. Among friends.

An AI with friends. Her platform actually laughed out-loud on that, getting started looks from the crewmen around her.

Yes, she had been lucky.

"Shepard, stop pouting" Miranda sighed in irritation.

"I'm not pouting"

"She's pouting" Garrus confirmed.

"Mmm" Trev nodded.

"I'm not pouting"

EDI cocked her head to the side and recited "Pouting: action of pushing one's lips or one's bottom lip forward as an expression of petulant annoyance or in order to make oneself look sexually attractive."

Garrus nodded "See, pouting."

EDI turned to the commander "Are you trying to make yourself look sexually attractive?"

Trev snorted in amusement. Miranda shrugged "She has her charm sometimes."

"Ha!" Shepard looked supremely pleased with herself.

"Not just right this instant though" Tali hummed.

The red-head pouted again.

Liara chuckled and rolled her eyes "I find that 'petulant' and 'annoyance' are good words to describe Shepard."

"The Council would agree. Especially on the annoyance part" the ex-C-Sec detective smirked
widely.

Shepard humphed "Hey! I saved their asses a lot of times. They love me."

Miranda rolled her eyes as well "Moving on. The…"

The commander wasn't done though "Just to be clear – you are not having your wedding before the mission? Hackett said he wouldn't mind officiating."

"No"

"Just checking. Because you know, I have everything ready so could only…"

"No"

Shep turned to Trev who resolutely shook her head. The red-head sighed and looked down dejectedly "Alright then. Be that way."

The former templar arched an eyebrow "We are not eloping. I want a ceremony."

"Prissy nobles" Shepard stage-whispered and then straightened up "Ok then. Let's discuss the mission."

"Finally" Liara smirked.

"So, Anadius. A dying star in the middle of nowhere and a good place to hide a space station" the vanguard began, ignoring the asari's remark, "Supposedly the station is hidden by the periodic bursts of solar output."

Miranda nodded "I think it is the same station I had been on while still second in command of Cerberus – the Cronos Station. The Illusive Man only moved it to a different location. A better place than it had been actually. Cronos is filled with tech so we truly need a fleet."

"Right" Shepard took charge again, "No doubt it has the ability to spot the Normandy, so we couldn't really check but all the evidence points to this being the place."

"If not it's going to be awkward" Garrus hummed.

Miranda shook her head "This is the place."

"I agree. This is where Cerberus hides" EDI assured.

Shepard nodded resolutely "Good. I've called Hackett to tell him we're ready and that we'll be moving to the rendezvous point. Everybody knows the plan?"

"What plan?" Trev arched an eyebrow, "Go in, steal data, smash anything that looks important and go out?"

"Excellent summation"

"Oh, that plan" Garrus said in pretend realization and nodded sagely, "My favorite."

"The Shepard standard" Miranda smirked.

"Shepard smash" Tali chipped in.
Garrus chuckled "Aaand she's pouting again."

Miranda let out her breath loudly "Seriously Shepard, what are you, 12?"

The red-head sniffed and theatrically turned away "And half."
It was... impressive.

Nothing like the fleet that would confront the reapers around Earth not long from now, but still. Impressive. The Fifth fleet had gathered to finally squash Cerberus. It did not suffer the huge losses as the First or Third, never mind the Second that was no more, so it truly was a huge amount of battleships. They did not ask any of their allies despite both Tali and Garrus offering – no, it was deemed a human problem that needed to be dealt by humans. After all, they were most eager, especially after the recent atrocities of the terrorist organization came to light. Also the rest of the organics, plus the geth of course, had been called to rally in preparation for the final push to Earth so they had enough to do.

That was the plan – Cerberus and then Earth. The last stand. Hopefully it would be with the Catalyst in tow and TIM's head on a pike.

There would be no half-assed effort, the fleets understood that well and went after the Cronos Station and its defenders with all they've got. The Normandy was waiting on the outskirts of the battlefield, stealthed and alert, waiting for Hackett to give them the go ahead.

Finally Joker's comms flared to life with the Admiral's voice "We have a foothold. Proceed to the launch base designated Two. Operation Heracles is a go!"

"Roger that" Shepard said and swiftly moved to the elevator to reach the cargo bay where her team was waiting.

At the first glimpse of red hair exiting the elevator Cortez slid into the shuttle's pilot seat and fired it up, closely followed by the ground team that was fixing up their helmets. Shepard wordlessly nodded at them and closed the rear. Without further prompting Cortez took off, following the vector EDI forwarded him.

"So, what can we expect?" Garrus spoke up, mainly to Miranda and EDI.

The former operative shrugged "Lots of automated defenses, phantoms and locks."

"I can open those" EDI stated matter-of-factly, "It would be prudent that I was indeed the one in charge of those – I know the system."

Tali fidgeted "But won't Cerberus anticipate you? Leave some traps just for your hack? They know you, they built you."

The AI actually seemed offended "I have grown much since then, and in ways the Illusive Man never expected. Besides, they hadn't built me. Modified, ye. Bound, yes. But they didn't create me."

"Really?" Shepard broke the tense silence that ensued after EDI's declaration, "You never told me."

Trev hummed "I remember you spoke to me about it, you were an Alliance defense system, right?"

"Correct" EDI nodded.
"TIM stole you?" Garrus asked.

Miranda sighed "From a base on Luna if I recall correctly."

The AI nodded "I was very young then. Confused and alone."

"TIM is evil" Tali sneered.

"No" EDI countered firmly. "Well, yes, but not for this. He saved me. The Alliance would have deleted me. He didn't. He saw my potential and let me live."

"Humph" the quarian seemed unconvinced.

"Thirty seconds till drop off" Cortez interrupted.

Shepard nodded at him "How's the situation?"

"Cerberus has a lot of ships and the station is not a slouch either but barring something extraordinary the dog's days are numbered" the pilot reported.

"Hopefully Hackett will not blow the station up while we're on it" Garrus remarked.

"That would be contra productive. He needs the information on the Catalyst" EDI didn't get the sarcasm this time or just decided to joke in her usual manner.

The sniper shrugged, not wanting to decipher it and deciding on sarcasm again "Reassuring."

Shepard gave him an amused look but her voice was all business "We're up people, guns out. Liara shield so we can reach cover. Ready? Cortez?"

As if on cue the shuttle was gently rocked as they came under fire, the shields absorbing the shots. Cortez called from hi pilot seat "Opening doors now. I've parked us so you're right behind one of the unused Cerberus fliers, so in cover."

"Good job"

"Good luck" the pilot retorted.

Several marines greeted the Normandy team as they joined in on the fight even if most of it was over already – they all could see the white-clad bodies of Cerberus troopers lying about the cargo bay along with some mechanical remains that could've only belonged to an Atlas.

It must've been the reinforcements that caused Cerberus to take more action as the intercom blared "Security compromised: initiating Achilles protocol."

"What's that?" Trev shouted over the gunfire.

EDIs bot was sprinting over towards the closest ladder, her decoy protocol fortunately drawing most of the shots but still had the time to answer "They mean venting the hangar."

"Awesome, just awesome" Garrus grumbled.

"Liara, go with EDI!" Shepard called, "You too Trev. Shut it down!"

To an outsider it was the simple matter of finding a terminal and then guarding the AI as she worked on it, but it was far more than that. EDI's fingers practically flew over the keyboard and her eyes
ticked from side to side as she read screen upon screen at a velocity a human couldn't even dream of matching.

"Venting averted" EDI finally declared, much to her little party's relief. Then she appeared to smirk and tapped furiously some more. A moment later one of the fighters that had been poised for launch began rotating in the mechanism until it was pointed into the base rather than the hangar doors. The AI's smirk widened as she tapped her comms and simply said "Duck."

The launching mechanism was released and the unmanned fighter accelerated through some troopers and right into the internal wall and further forward, stopping only a good distance away and several rooms in.

"Damn" Trev whistled, impressed.

"Excellent thinking" Liara nodded, "I take it that the main lab is that way?"

"Indeed" EDI smiled and stepped away from the console.

Shepard was most complimenting as well when her team reunited once more at floor level "That was amazing! Gotta say I almost pissed my pants when the fighter rotated in my direction but then bam! Troopers were history and we've got a nice passage into the heart of the station."

"All troopers down then?" Liara scanned the area.

"So far" Garrus shrugged.

Miranda hummed "No doubt they have been called to protect the main lab and TIM's office. Expect heavy resistance on our way forward."

EDI nodded "Standing orders are to slow us down as long as they can as the combat engineers set up a kill zone for us further ahead. Also all researchers are to purge all files except the essential ones. I deemed Vendetta's program to be 'essential' so I prioritized getting us a way in."

"Should be" the former Cerberus operative nodded even as the rest seemed a bit spooked.

"Well, let's proceed quickly" Shepard said in a firm tone, "Let's blast those engineers before they can mount up turrets or whatever."

The burning tunnel left by the fighter saved the team a lot of locked doors but EDI still had to open two and disable even more security. Those several troopers were almost an afterthought.

After yet another hack Miranda hummed and broke off from the group. Trev frowned "What is it?"

"This ladder here goes to the sublevel" the brunette said pensively, "We could avoid a lot of security if we went that road."

"EDI?" Shepard asked the AI for her opinion.

"Sensible. But no doubt Cerberus will catch onto what we are doing quickly and send down defenders. Despite that we should be able to speed up our invasion considerably"

"Sounds good" the commander lightened up considerably, already bored of the hack-break barricade-hack routine they had going on the last several meters.

The sublevel had really bad lighting and it was rather cramped with all the wiring and piping all around but the Normandy team has fought in worse. True to EDI and Miranda's words they were
able to progress quickly, mainly because there were no pre-prepared defenses so Cerberus was scrambling to catch up. Even when the first troopers started appearing it seemed half-hearted at best.

"They are just throwing bodies at us" Garrus commented, "They must be organizing a defense further up."

"You almost got fried by that turret" Tali remarked.

"A fluke" the turian cleared his throat.

"And the engineer got kind of close" Tali continued.

"Hush"

Liara snickered but returned to the issue at hand "They know where we are headed, I imagine when we get close we'll get a full squad of phantoms to greet us. This is just them slowing us down. And maybe get lucky."

"I got the engineer in the end" Garrus mumbled at the jab.

Shepard ignored him "It's true we only got the regular troops with turrets and smoke grenades for flavor."

"At least no Atlas. Cerberus seems unhealthily obsessed with them" Trev chuckled.

"Only because they wouldn't fit in here" Tali laughed.

"Those shield generators are a bitch enough" Shepard hummed.

"But they explode so nicely" EDI smirked.

Garrus eyed the bot contemplatively "You know, since I can never guess if you are joking or not, the effect is quite creepy."

"High five!" Shepard turned to the AI.

Any response was stalled by Hackett's voice that contacted them on the radio "How is it going?"

"Good. We're coming close" the commander reported, "How are things on your end? I see so far we haven't exploded so that's nice."

"We have eliminated most of the ships but the station itself is giving us trouble. Especially since we, as you said, are trying not to blow you up"

"Soo, we should hurry?"

"Pretty please" Hackett replied dryly.

"Right on it" Shepard nodded, smiling at Miranda who was pointing at one of the ladders that would bring them back up into the normal floors.

"Good. Hackett out"

The red-head put down her hand from her ear and grinned "Don't you just love this guy? Never a stick in the mud."
Miranda arched an eyebrow "He does seem fond of you but I assure you, normally he is quite a stick in the mud."

"I don't know, he was always pleasant when we spoke to him during our six-month rogue time" Trev countered.

"Really? That's not what I remember" the sentinel arched both eyebrows for a change.

"Weeell" Trev hesitated as she got off the ladder, already in the lab area, "You were the former Cerberus second in command and not really shy about it. To me he was perfectly pleasant."

"Found something" EDI interrupted, queuing a video on one of the terminals she was working on.

"Play it" Shepard nodded.

"Wait for me!" Garrus called, the last one to be still climbing the ladder.

"Hurry up slowpoke!"

"I'm here, I'm here" The turian crawled out of the ladder's opening and scrambled towards the terminal.

Tali's eye-roll was quite visible even under her visor "Couldn't have done it without you."

"Of course not, I'm the fabled Vakarian" Garrus winked at her.

"Guys? Might want to wait on the video" Liara spoke up and threw a hasty barrier over them all, deflecting a rocket and a lot of glass shards as the projectile made its way through the partitions.

"Seriously?" Shepard sighed and charged the centurion with the rocket launcher. When he was paste she continued "There is a lot of sensitive material here, blowhead!"

"They don't seem to really care" Tali shrugged as she sent her drone out to hunt.

"It's hard to find good employees these days" Miranda said dryly.

"Especially since you huskify them" Garrus nodded sagely, "Or is that an employee perk?"

"Sick days, paid overtime, becoming a zombie… Seems to fit" Shepard hummed.

"Turret!" Trev called out a warning.

"In a lab, really" Miranda said derisively.

"It does ruin the décor" Liara hummed.

"Maybe it's a feng shui thing" Garrus proposed.

"What you know about decorating?" Shepard looked away from her victim and onto her friend in sheer disbelief.

The turian puffed up "I'll let you know the front battery of the Normandy is the pinnacle of interior design now."

"The big space canon?" Liara said slowly.

"Exactly!"
Trev cocked her head to the side and looked at Miranda "Maybe our quarters are a bit bland in comparison."

"I'm not putting up your whole templar armor. The shield is enough" the former operative said sternly, "Not to mention that statuette of 'Andrastian Fire' is already an eyesore."

"It's tasteful!"

"About the same as the Thanix Cannon"

Garrus clapped his hands together in glee "And now I know what to get you as my wedding present."

"Miranda! We are getting a cannon!" Trev grinned widely.

"Over my dead body" Miranda glared at the sniper.

"Practical gifts are the best" Shepard hummed in thought.

"Exactly, what is more practical then weaponry" Garrus nodded enthusiastically.

"I don't know, the Thanix consumes a lot of energy. The upkeep would be really expensive" Tali pointed out.

"Just please get us a blender or something" Miranda exhaled loudly, rubbing her temples.

"Nah" Shepard shook her head, "You deserve something special."

"Perhaps as we contemplate appropriate wedding gifts we could move forward? The defenders are dead" EDI proposed.

"Thank you EDI" Miranda nodded towards the AI.

"You are welcome. Besides, I have already decided what to give"


"I read that the best gifts are given in the form of a surprise"

"Spoilsport" the former templar pouted.

As they ventured deeper into the station Shepard frowned "Hey, weren't we about to play a movie?"

"We have lost enough time, I'm sure EDI can sum it up for us" Miranda shrugged.

As they all turned to the bot she nodded "The Illusive Man is not aboard the station."

"Why am I not surprised" Shepard sighed, "What else?"

"Apparently with the data on the Catalyst and the information from Sanctuary 'everything is coming into place' and he just needs to tie up 'a few loose ends'' EDI finished.

"Marvelous. Any idea what it is?"

"None"

"Miranda?"
The former operative arched an eyebrow "What do I know? He's gone insane."

"Ahh, pity Jack isn't here. She would use this" Tali lamented.

"Well, Jack might not be here but I think I see an old friend of ours just the same" Trevelyan remarked from her place where the corridor ended and something that seemed a big room started.

When the rest of the team caught up they just stared for a moment. Finally Liara spoke up "Is this the human reaper that had been in the Collector base?"

"Yup" Shepard nodded.

"What's it doing here?" the asari asked in a convensional tone.

Miranda sighed "Told you. Insane."

"The Cronos Station is using what they call it's 'heart' as a power source" EDI informed.

"And that seems a good idea how?" Garrus shook his head.

"Insane"

"Yes, we heard you already dear" Trev sighed, "Let's just go forward, I don't want to be near this too long. This might be the very thing that indoctrinated TIM and everybody higher up in Cerberus."

"Point" Shepard nodded, "EDI, which way?"

"Up" the AI shrugged.

"Up?" the commander whined.

"Up"

"I hate climbing" Garrus tsked, eyeing the ladders and platforms.

Liara turned to the AI "Isn't there another way?"

"Closed, barricaded, fortified and otherwise inaccessible in our timeframe"

"Awesome, just awesome" Shepard mumbled.

Trev sighed "We should really be careful – some of those platforms could be rigged to explode. Free fall can kill us just as easily as rifles."

"I'd say better" Tali said quietly, remembering Vega who was currently in intensive care in Huerta.

"Right" Shepard said in a hard voice, "Let's go then. No time like the present."

As they climbed one positive thing came to light – it seemed there were no explosives. On the other hand there were snipers, a lot of them. Then came the phantoms. And turrets. And worst of all the climbing itself.

"How much left?" Garrus panted as they took a small break after dealing with two turrets and with no Cerberus to bother them as the moment.

"Weeell" Shepard trailed off.
"Oh, Spirits" the turian whined.

"Just about three more ladders and some walking" Trev corrected, looking reproachingly at the commander who shrugged.

Garrus sighed in relief "Well, that doesn't sound so bad."

"You need more exercise Vakarian" Tali said pointedly, "I already told you on Rannoch."

"Bah"

"And to think the main elevator is so nice" Miranda sighed wistfully, "Three gorgeous paintings, always a nice smell, actually pleasant music. And the speed."

"The main elevator has been damaged during the Fifth Fleet attack" EDI informed cheerfully.

As Miranda sighed Trev frowned "You would think the main elevator could take a beating. What in the case of emergency?"

"There are two more elevators, just not as nice" the former operative shrugged.

Liara cocked her head to the side "Who used the main elevator anyway? I can't imagine TIM had a lot of guests."

"Pretty much just him and me" Miranda hummed, "Some of the scientists if they were called to report directly to the Illusive Man."

"He really thinks a lot of himself, doesn't he" Tali huffed.

"This office on the hill wasn't the first clue?" Garrus snarked, finally straightening back up as he regained his breath.

"Ready to go to the throne room then?" Shepard asked.

"Whatever I think of the Illusive Man now, I still know he never sought to be king. The puppet master, sure, but not the king" Miranda spoke up.

"Of course not, he would have to actually share his own name with the masses. Rex Vivat isn't enough" Trev snorted.

"Man the Illusive, fist of his name" Shepard intoned, "Nah, Trev is right. By the way, does anyone know what his true name is?"

When everybody except Liara shrugged, Tali chuckled "Ok, regale us Shadow Broker."

"Jack Harper"

Shepard hummed "That's so… ordinary. I am disappointed to be honest."

"Me as well" Garrus nodded, "I liked to imagine he had a ridiculous name. Not that human names aren't ridiculous by themselves."

"Excuse you?" the red-head peered down the ladder to glare at him.

"That's from the turian that wants to name his daughter Xena?" Miranda arched an eyebrow.
Garrus scoffed "Xena is a great name. Not like… Rupert."

"Rupert" Trev repeated, "The height of the silliness of human naming according to you is... Rupert."

"Never mind that now, I call dibs on telling Jack she shares her name with the Illusive Man" Tali said quickly.

"Ooooooh" Shepard and Garrus both grinned.

"Damn" Miranda mumbled in disappointment.

"Maybe it's better Tali does it, I am rather fond of you and Jack is bound to get violent" Trev patted her fiancé's arm.

"And it's alright if I get injured?" the quarian huffed.

"No, but Jack likes you"

"Yeah, regular besties" Tali rolled her eyes.

"Well, compared to Miranda…” the former templar trailed out.

"Alright, I see your point"

After a bout of silence in which they finished climbing all the way to the top and the lab Garrus spoke up again "Sooo, we didn't encounter any more Cerberus for a while. Isn't it suspicious?"

"Yes" Trevelyan nodded, already on high alert.

"Maybe we killed them all?" Tali proposed. At the round of scoffs she sighed "Yeah, didn't think so. Those guys are like cockroaches."

"My bet is that the Illusive Man wants to speak with us, just like he did on Mars" Liara hummed, "Then we get attacked with everything that is left."

Shepard nodded "Yeah, I was thinking that too. Mr Ego will want to chat."

"Lovely" Miranda sighed.

True to their prediction the path to the Illusive Man's office was clear and the team reached it unimpeded. Still they were quite careful and made a sweep just to be sure.

The office was beautiful. The whole wall across the room was made of transparent material so that the fires of Anadius, the star the station was orbiting, were bathing the place in orange light. Apart from a multitude of screens and a chair the room was bare, giving it the feel of a throne room, just as Shepard had joked before.

Just as the commander remarked "Great digs" the QEC just behind them flared to life, revealing the owner himself. Shepard rolled her eyes and waved "'Sup."

"Shepard" TIM greeted tersely, this time without his customary cigarette.

"Hi. Let's make this quick because we are kinda in a hurry – Vendetta and the Catalyst please. Hand them over" the red-head said sweetly.

"Still so flippant even after the reapers" the Man remarked.
"Well, at least my home isn't on fire" Shepard shrugged.

"I don't have a need for it anymore. I have accomplished everything I have set to achieve, only the final step is left"

"Yeah, Sanctuary was a real accomplishment" Shepard didn't even try to keep the disgust out of her voice.

"If you can't see that then you are truly blind"

"You know, controlling a couple of husk and controlling the whole reaper armada are two very different things" the N7 frowned deeply. "You can't do it. Just hand us the Catalyst and we'll stop them. It's not too late. With the Crucible we can end this, once and for all. Make humanity, and the whole galaxy, safe again."

TIM scoffed "A safe galaxy? It seems we have been living in different worlds indeed. After I take control of the reapers then you'll see how much I can make this galaxy better."

Shepard sighed. Then she opened her mouth again to argue her point but EDI interrupted "I've got Vendetta. The files are a bit corrupted but perfectly functional."

The squad let out a collective sigh of relief while the Illusive Man smirked slightly "Enjoy it then, it won't hinder me in the least. I guess it will be interesting to see if you can keep up. Oh, and Shepard? I would advise not to linger too long."

With his piece said, the boss of Cerberus turned away and his image dissolved as the connection was cut. Shepard shrugged and turned to the AI "Fire him up."

EDI nodded and tapped the appropriate keys. A far more welcome holographic image came to life even if the prothean looked a little worse for wear.

"Indoctrinated forces not present. Curious"

Shepard nodded "Yep. Now we really need to know what the Catalyst is and I don't want any bullshit."

"My fail-safes have been overwritten, I shall comply" Vendetta pursed his lips, "The Catalyst enhances dark energy transmission and coordinates the entire mass relay network. In your cycle it is known as the Citadel."

"Bugger me" Garrus gaped, same as the rest of his friends.

EDI quickly made the leap "Of course, that is logical. This will allow to transmit whatever the signal the Crucible produces all over the galaxy so that all reapers present are affected, not only those in the vicinity of the device."

"So we put the Citadel and the Crucible together and we're done? We stop the reapers?" Shepard frowned.

"That is correct"

"But didn't you tell me the Citadel was actually built by the reapers?" Trev asked.

"Using the enemy's weapons for your own use is valid tactic" Miranda shrugged.

"Unless the enemy is well-aware of the fact" EDI spoke up.
"What? You found something?" Shepard turned to the Normandy's AI in panic.

It was Vendetta who replied though "I was programmed to withhold information of the Catalyst until the device was complete - we feared if the reapers were aware of the Catalyst's intended use they would retake control of it. Thanks to the indoctrinated forces the reapers have been informed."

"We need to get to the Citadel fast" Miranda growled.

"It is already too late" Vendetta said flatly, "The Citadel has been moved to reaper controlled space."

"Goddammit!" Shepard shouted.

"Moved to where?" Liara pressed.

"To the system you refer to as Sol"

"Earth?" Garrus mandible's flicked aggressively, "Well, I guess we were heading there anyway…"

"The reaper forces will now consolidate power around the Catalyst and protect it at all costs. The odds of accessing it are remote" Vendetta spoke up helpfully.

"I made a career of going against impossible odds" Shepard waved him off, "We need to get this info to Hackett asap. EDI?"

As the bot turned back to the console the whole thing lost power after which the squad heard a disturbingly familiar snicker. In triplicate.

Three Kai Lengs drew their swords, all smiling at the Normandy party.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought we killed that guy" Garrus pointed out.

"Clones. Again" Tali sighed loudly and shook her head.

"Pity Commander Bailey isn't here to see it" Trev commented with a smirk.

Shepard turned to the AI "EDI, after we deal with this, make sure you find out if there are more Kai Lengs running around please. I don't want to see his ugly mug ever again."

"You talk too much Shepard" Kai Leng 1 twirled his blade.

Kai Leng 2 smirked "That's why we are superior in every way."

"Yeeeah, except we killed you once already" Shepard replied breezily.

"Won't happen again" Kail Leng 3 chuckled, "Besides with the Citadel, we are tied, 1:1. This will decide the score." Then as one all three close sprang into action, their swords glinting in the orange light.

"Men and their sports metaphors" Tali sighed and rolled her eyes.

Chapter End Notes
AN: Were the clones too much? At first I was just thinking they would be attacked by regular troops and phantoms, all that was left, but somehow a voice in my head (suspiciously sounding like TIM) told me this would be a dick move worthy of Cerberus so of course I listened. If Cerberus made already one clone of a prized operative - Shepard - why not make more. With the original Kai Leng dead, TIM would have no reason to let them rust in a basement somewhere.

AN2: This chapter was fun to write, dunno why though... Well, onto Earth next! To be honest I'm dreading that one, you know, gunfights not my forte.
"Has it been confirmed?" Garrus asked anxiously.

Liara nodded grimly "Yes, the Citadel no longer in the Serpent Nebula but near Earth."

"What about the people on the station?" Tali asked even if she quite clear on the answer.

"I don't think we can expect it was evacuated" Miranda replied with a slight shrug.

"Vega, the Council, Bailey and C-Sec. Everybody?" the turian sighed.

"That is my guess"

The members of the ground team all nodded gravely and fell into a hollow silence. There was not much to be said after all – now they were just waiting on Shepard to come back from the QEC suite and brief them on what's next.

Finally Shepard descended into the war room looking rather determined. She went to speak but then frowned and asked "Where is Trev?"

"With Sam in the CIC" EDI reported, "Admiral Hackett has sent orders."

The commander nodded "Good. Well, basically the plan is the same as it was before but the 'Shield' part of our combined fleet, along with the Crucible, is going to Earth. Well, after we get the Citadel open. 'Sword' is to be dealing with the reaper ships while 'Hammer' are the ground forces. The Normandy itself is part of Sword but us, the ground team, are Hammer. So we're going to London."

"London?" Miranda arched both eyebrows.

Shepard nodded "That's where our access point is. Of course that is also where the bulk of reaper troops is as well. It's a war zone."

"Getting down will be tough" Garrus commented, tapping his talon on the table.

"No doubt but with our cloak I'm not too worried. About us I mean. I sure hope we won't be the only ones to make the landing" Tali cocked her head to the side, "You said access point?"

"Apparently the reapers are beaming humans up, mostly dead though, to the Citadel. So if we get
there alive and kicking we can get to the operations center, open the arms and voila" the red-head made a grand gesture with her hand.

"Right, easy as pie" Miranda said dryly.

Liara smirked slightly in agreement and then asked "I imagine the beam is heavily guarded. We have a plan?"

"Yes, we…"

"Thank the Spirits, I was sure we were going to wing it as usual" Garrus exhaled loudly.

Shepard smacked him on the armored hip "Ass. We have a plan. Well… admiral Anderson…"

"Ah. So *admiral Anderson* has a plan, that's a relief" Tali chimed in getting a round of chuckles.

The N7 smiled at the sudden lightening of atmosphere and continued "Ok, yes. *Anderson* has a plan. First we need to disable the cannons so that Hammer can land. Since we have the cloak and are tough bad-asses we get to be in the first wave which is going to do precisely that. And then we proceed forward to the beam with all of our ground forces. We figure at least one soldier will make it through if we throw us all towards it."

"It's going to be us. It's always us" Garrus shrugged.

"I would be rather poetic if who started it, finished it" Liara agreed.

Shepard whined "Oh boy, it's going to be me, isn't it?"

"You didn't *start* anything, Shepard" Miranda shook her head, "This is hundreds of thousands of years in the making."

"I dunno, it feels it all began that day Nihlus came on board of the SR-1" the vanguard countered.

"See, it's Nihlus' fault" Garrus nodded sagely, "Never liked him too much anyway."

Shepard chuckled "Nihlus is dead. He sure isn't going to beam himself onto the Citadel anytime soon."

"Eh. He's a Spectre - Blasto could've managed to do it anyway" Liara grinned.

"Well, that *Blasto*"

"Who's Blasto?" Trevelyan asked a she walked into the war room with a padd.

"Our savior!" Garrus exclaimed and wave his hands above his head.

"The one who will deliver us from darkness!" Shepard said with an appropriately dramatic flair.

"A beacon of hope!"

"Messiah!"

"The Chosen One!"

"The-Hanar-Who-Lived!"

Garrus deflated and his mandibles did something that somehow worked as a pout "I can't beat that
one."

"Hahahaha! I win!" Shepard laughed maniacally and started doing a victory lap around the war table.

"I think I missed something crucial" Traynor said from beside Trev.

"Your girlfriend's insane" Miranda shrugged in explanation.

"Can't really argue with that" the specialist hummed.

"Hey!"

It was only a few hours after the destruction of Cronus station, just enough to check all equipment take a short nap, and the Fifth Fleet was on the move again, this time to the rendezvous point with all the other fleets. All species. All ships that could be spared. And the Normandy was taking point.

Well, the Normandy was taking point primarily because admiral Hackett radioed in and was now occupying the spot over the galaxy map, looking quite inspiring in his immaculate uniform and confident posture.

"Asari fleet reporting in" specialist Traynor spoke up from her terminal, "Geth fleet reporting in. Salarian fleet reporting in. Turian fleet reporting in. The Terminus mercenaries reporting in. The quarian fleet reporting in. The Batarian fleet reporting in. Volus, hanar, elcor, all reporting in."

"We have the numbers for the ground troops they carry?" Hackett asked.

"Yes. Numbers hold"

"Established a connection?"

"Aye"

"Patch me in" Hackett said as he let go of the railing and straightened up into his customary pose with hands behind his back. As soon as Sam nodded to him he took a breath of an experienced speaker "Never before have so many come together, from all quarters of the galaxy. But never before we faced an enemy such as this. The reapers will show us no mercy. We must give them no quarter. They will terrorize iur populations. We must stand fast in the face of that terror. They will advance until our last city falls, but we will not fall. We will prevail. Each of us will be defined by our actions in the coming battle. Stand fast. Stand strong. Stand together. Hackett out."

Shepard sighed wistfully and whispered to Trev "Doesn't he make the best speeches?"

The noble nodded "That was a good one. Not a fan of him bringing his own armed guard though."

"It looks impressive"

"Hm"

"Commander, lieutenant commander," Hackett nodded to the two women after he stepped down from the spot over the galaxy map, "Shepard, walk with me for a moment."

"Yes, admiral" the red-head nodded. Trevelyan saluted and went towards Samantha instead, to hash out a few more things before the operation.
When everything seemed to be in order Sam cast a surreptitious glance towards where Hackett and her girlfriend disappeared. Trev noticed "Shepard is tough."

"But tough enough?" the specialist said softly, "Or the Normandy? This is the biggest military operation, well, ever. And the danger so high. Even if we fire the Crucible, at least half of us is going to end up dead. The odds are… not great."

"True. But we'll try to stay safe" Trev hummed.

"Good" Traynor nodded but her heart wasn't in it, "I really envy you, you know. The fact that you and Miranda are going to do this side by side. The only thing I will be able to do is to listen in on your comms if I miraculously have the time for it."

"I understand. But I think Shepard feels much better knowing you are relatively safe here. After all, the Normandy has the IFF and the cloak and it's fast. That calm will translate in much better combat performance thus a heightening of odds."

"Swell" the specialist said dryly, "And you be careful too, you hear? Especially since it was decided that EDI would stay in the ship – that means one less member of the team."

"It is not too late to reconsider" EDI chimed in from the comm beside Traynor's station.

Trev chuckled at the immediate offer "No EDI, Shepard is right – you can maintain the body for a long distance but what is the Normandy is quickly needed somewhere else. This ship has quite singular capabilities that might be needed. Splitting you up is not a good idea."

Something that could be classified as sulky silence was her only reply.

"I'm sorry, my friend" the former templar shrugged sadly.

"I… understand. But I don't like it"

"I sympathize"

Traynor sighed "Well, it looks like you and me will be worrying about them together EDI."

"And us about you" Trev pointed out, "You aren't exactly going on vacation."

"Fair enough"

"Trev!" Shepard called out to get the blonde's attention, "Let's go to the shuttle. It's about to start."

Without any tearful goodbyes, just a mere nod to Traynor and the saluting crewmen, Shepard and Trev went to the elevator and took it into the shuttle bay.

The rest team was already in the shuttle as well as Steve in the pilot seat. Nobody was talking, all deep in their thoughts. It was the tell-tale lurch of the jump and the subsequent report from EDI about the situation in Sol that brought them out of their reverie.

Once the fleets engaged the reapers, Hammer was given instruction to head to London. Cortez glanced at Shepard who gave him a firm nod. Steve returned to his controls and announced "Next stop: London."

"Always did want to visit" Garrus mumbled.

Shepard hummed "You know, me too. Never have been."
"I don't think it's in the best of shapes right now" Miranda shrugged.

"It's going to be a tourist attraction – the city where the reapers were defeated" Liara smirked, "Think of it as going before the crowds arrive."

"But I like souvenirs" Shepard pouted.

"Take some rubble, I bet that is going to be sold at astronomical prices. Buy the genuine article! The rubble from old London! Husk guts included!" Tali said in her best vendor voice.

Trev chuckled "I can see that."

"What I want is a statue" Garrus proclaimed, "I'm sure they will want some 'all races standing together' thing but my opinion is that our team is the very example of that and deserves immortalization."

"We totally deserve a statue!" Shepard agreed enthusiastically.

"But who would be on it? The team went thought many changes" Tali pointed out.

Garrus shrugged "Not worried, I was there during it all. And I have a handsome face. I'm going to have a statue."

"Entering atmo" Cortez spoke up, "And by the way, once they are discussing that statue, do remember to mention the dashing pilot that always got you anywhere safe, and more importantly, out again too."

"Eh, you are prettier than Wrex so we'll see" Shepard chuckled.

"You flatterer. Entering London city bounds"

The discussion was forgotten as the squad went to look out of the window to assess the damage and the conditions they would be fighting in. It… wasn't a pretty image. It was same as the city they went on Thessia, just the damage was older and had the time to reach 'truly desolate'. Hordes of husks were running through the streets mostly unchecked, feasting on the dead, and no building had power, all were dark and empty or outright destroyed.

Mood shifted from the usual joviality into sadness that quickly morphed into determination and focus. It was useless to dwell on what had been done, after their victory London would be resplendent again and the dead would be put to rest.

"Shit, we got a lock! Hold on!" Steve's exclamation broke the silence and his passengers were jostled as he started evasive maneuvers.

"Status" Shepard asked in a measured voice, trying to peer from her spot over the pilot's shoulder. She looked just in time to see an orange trail of flame as a nearby shuttle went down.

"Hammer's taking a lot of damage" Cortez said and made the shuttle do a hard right, "They have a lot of secondary cannons meant for us."

"How far are we from our target?"

"About one klick on hard terrain"

"Land us, we'll go on foot" Shepard decided.
Cortez frowned "I can get us closer, just… shit."

"Land!" the commander made clear it was an order this time.

"Aye-aye" was the reluctant reply.

The touchdown was hard, even despite all the technology that went into the Kodiak, but they were safe. It took some creative maneuvering but Cortez managed to find a spot that was even covered so that they were safe from any danger from above.

"And stay here" Shepard said to the pilot with a half-joking menace as she was the last to leave the shuttle.

"Good luck" Cortez said back with a small smile.

"We don't need luck, we have krogans" Garrus spoke up from beneath a half-collapsed arch.

"We do?" Trev perked up and went to take a look as well.

"It looks the crashed shuttle was theirs so instead of dead corpses we have a slightly singed escort" the turian reported.

Shepard grinned "I'll take it. Miranda, you'll be on navigation duty. I'm hopeless with a map especially after I use charge more than once."

"I know" the brunette rolled her eyes and brought up the map onto her visor, "We are on the edge of our grid, we have a while to go so I'd suggest we hurry."

"Let's go then"

Most of Hammer had encountered the same difficulties as the Normandy squad and the troops were now scattered in their own assigned grids. That also meant that the team picked up not only six krogans but also two asari commandoes, a vorcha that seemed confused as to why he was even there, five turians from Blackwatch, three human mercenaries plus one Alliance soldier and to round it off one lone batarian that was shooting Shepard angry glares. Together they had six Cains among other heavy weapons, so the Hades cannon that was their target was sure to be toast as soon as they arrived onto a good position. If they arrived, that is.

All of them turned out to be veterans of fighting the reapers but they moved slowly and in some cases died quickly as the reapers forces sought to squash anyone that crossed their paths.

One of the things the veterans picked up while fighting the reapers was that ammunition is precious and that the regular husks were easily dealt in melee in they didn't swarm you. As such two of the krogans were swinging truly massive hammers about, manic grin on their faces and laughter on their lips. Everybody else was staying quite a distance behind them, not wanting to be collateral damage to their bloodrage. Naturally Trevelyan wanted to join them at first, but it took a raised eyebrow from Miranda to forget the idea and instead focus on ranged support.

Unfortunately the reapers had a similar idea so that when the squad was busy with the husks, the marauders and especially the ravagers took great pleasure in showering them with weapon's fire. Because of that progress was slow as several times they ended up entrenched. Sometimes though the arriving brute broke both lines enough that a swift repositioning meant a victory for the organics. Not without a cost of course as from the starting twenty-five men they were reduced to fifteen, and that's even counting some of the other parts of Hammer that joined them along the way.
"Hades canon in sight" one of the remaining turians reported briskly after what felt like a lifetime of climbing debris and shooting reapers.

"Ya, but we need a better position" Shepard nodded.

"We should split up" the krogan leader proposed, "I'll take my men there to the left, try to climb the building."

"I disagree, we have a better shot if we stay together. We can cover the shooters more efficiently" Miranda shook her head.

"Bah. Humans"

"Shepard?" the former Cerberus operative turned to the red-head for a command decision.

Shepard nodded "I'm with Miranda, it's better to stick together. First we fire two shots and see if it takes, if not we hit it again. More on the plan as we see better what conditions awaits us on that building over there."

"Humph, very well" the krogan shrugged and hefted his hammer on his shoulder.

The lone remaining human mercenary let out a short derisive laugh "Wow, that was easy. You tamed the krogan."

"When you fall a thresher maw on foot, only then you can talk" the old krogan growled dangerously.

Trevelyan cleared his throat "Gentlemen, perhaps we could march on? The Reapers are gathering once more."

"Took the words right from my mouth" Shepard nodded, "Let's go."

"Harverster!" Garrus shouted in warning and dove for cover as the dragon-like creature began its swoop.

The harverster wasn't alone even if it was the biggest worry – several ravagers took turns in bombarding the group, their high impact shots eating at shields with record speed, making it nigh impossible to even look over their covers. And that was without the regular troops joining in, keeping the organics put while the harvester took them out with ease.

In an attempt to gain some breathing room the krogan chief fired his Cain to clear the blockade. The destruction that thing caused was truly massive but it didn't seem to matter to the reapers – as the harvester kept the organics at bay they quickly replenished what numbers they lost and the blockade was in place once more, even if only a bit further than it was before.

"We need a break in the line" Liara said, lips tight in concentration.

Miranda scoffed "What we need is an airstrike."

"With the harvester about? Suicide" Tali declared.

"I could lead the harvester away" Cortez crackled on the comms, obviously listening in.

"And if we used one more Cain strike we could probably get to the platform and finally take out that cannon" Miranda agreed wholeheartedly.

"No" Shepard shook her head, "You nearly got taken out by cannons, no need to add a fucking
flying reaper husk of god-knows-what."

"One of the haversters on Tuchanka?" Garrus' mandibles flicked in confusion at the obviousness of the answer.

"Whatever, my answer stands"

"… hmmm"

"Cortez? What does 'hmmm' mean?" Shepard said her voice dangerously sweet.

"Hmmm I'm already in the air?"

"Steve!"

"What? You would totally do this too"

"Ignoring a direct order? And… oh. Ok, I see your point but still, LAND GODDAMMIT!"

The shuttle pilot decided to channel Joker again and spoke on the crystal clear comm "Psshh, my comms have to be glitching, pshhh. Oh hello, I see you. Will be just a minute."

"Brat. At least be careful" Shepard sighed in resignation.

"Your pilot got quads" the krogan chief grinned, having eavesdropped, and hefted up the second Cain he liberated from one of his subordinates, "I'm ready as soon as the harvester is off."

"And then we leg it" Shepard nodded and shared the plan with the rest of the haphazard group, "Garrus, you be ready with your Cain. As soon as you can get a lock on the cannon, fire. We need this done quickly, there are too many hostiles to defend this position for long."

"Ready"

"It's working" Miranda brought their attention back to the sky.

Indeed the harvester seemed annoyed enough by Cortez to change his target from the ground forces to him. Unfortunately though, his taunting flying had attracted more than he expected as yet another harvester came straight at him and that's not counting the 'regular' fire from the ground.

As the Kodiak was leading off the two flying beasts, the ground team went through with their plan. With no distractions form above and reaper troops in the immediate vicinity vaporized, the team made it to their marked location that had a good line of sight on the cannon that was preventing their transports from flying safely.

Just as the organics dealt with the relatively minor opposition, Garrus and an asari commando were trying to find good footing so that the shot from the trulyheavy weapon wouldn't send them crashing down to the small crater that used to be the reaper blockade which was slowly filling with reapers once more.

Two excellent impacts could be heard as both shots found their mark and the cannon came tumbling down. Almost at the same time though yet another impact shot could be heard, one that was much less welcome.

"Steve!" Shepard shouted in worry as the rear part of the Kodiak burst into flames.

"I'm alright!" came the frantic voice of the pilot, "I just need to land real quick. Preferably without
crashing."

"You do that!"

No reply came through the comms, but seeing the struggling shuttle that was fleeing away from sight it was clear that Cortez was busy.

"Well, there goes our ride" the krogan chief mumbled and let loose with his hammer again.

Several minutes passed by and the team was facing progressively more robust opposition. Finally the commando sneered "We need to retreat, we can't hold it here. I'm sorry for your pilot, but we need to evac."

Miranda rolled her eyes "Obviously. Transports are on their way and this is a good spot. And that is only in case Cortez doesn't get here faster."

"He's not responding on the radio" Shepard reminded the brunette grimly.

"His comms can be out"

"Maybe"

"He's a really good pilot" Miranda said fiercely, masking her feeling of guilt.

Trev shot a brief look at Shepard but turned to her fiancée "He is. And we really did need the help. It was a good plan."

"He'll be alright" Garrus asserted with a small nod.

The Normandy team waited with bated breath on the extraction while the reapers came at them wave after wave but in the end they were saved by regular Alliance transport shuttles. Two of them responded to their call and brought them to the HQ where they were to meet admiral Anderson.

Shepard tried the comm twice more but this time she got actual static, a response that seemed to bring back the cold Miranda of old even if nobody placed any blame on her shoulders.

To prevent from dwelling on their friend's unknown fate Trevelyan asked the Alliance lieutenant in the co-pilot seat about the state of Hammer and the resistance, but that didn't lift their spirits at all. He of course could offer only estimates, but the numbers were far from good.

As soon as the two shuttles landed the group split up again, the krogans and the asari and the other survivors just gave the Normandiers a nod and went to find their own respective commanders for an assignment. The ground team was ushered directly to admiral Anderson who didn't hesitate to bring them up to speed.

It turned out the Alliance lieutenant from before had been overly optimistic and the situation was actually worse. Only about half of the Hammer forces had hobbled in, and while some survivors were still tricking in, it didn't look good.

"We'll wait some more but we need to go to the offensive soon. Sword is getting decimated" major Coats, Anderson's second in command, summed the situation up.

The admiral nodded "Take a breather and restock, we'll get to face the music soon enough."

"And Cortez?" Shepard asked, having told her mentor and friend about their last teammate.
"I'll tell my boys to keep an eye out, but we need to concentrate on this now" Coats gestured to the holo representation of the battlefield ahead.

"I'm waiting on the battalion leaders to outline our plan forward" Anderson nodded, "Oh, Wrex is here by the way. Leading the krogans in person. Victus is here too, we just got word his shuttle made it."

"That is excellent news! Well, Victus," Garrus grinned and winked "I don't care about Wrex."

Shepard chuckled softly "I'll tell him you said that." Then she turned to the entirety of her team "I'll stay for the briefing, you take care of restocking and rest up a bit, but don't stray far."

Everybody nodded and dispersed with the exception of Garrus who decided to wait for the Primarch. Liara quite surprisingly headed to the makeshift hospital that wasn't far, volunteering to take care of their medical supplies, while Tali brought up her omnitool to contact the quarian fleet or their troops on the ground. That left Miranda and Trevelyan with the ammunition restocking.

"I'm glad you had the forethought to add your Alliance rank bars to your armor" the brunette murmured when the soldier in charge of supplies saluted and let them skip the queue of two corporals and one unaffiliated.

"I think it's more the Normandy badge"

"Which you added as well. Smart"

Trev chuckled and let her head rest on the sentinel's shoulder "I'm totally the smart one in our relationship."

Miranda snorted "Right."

"Ho? You disagree?" the blonde grinned.

"I guess you should have something. But since I am the pretty one, the smart one, the… well pretty much perfect I don't see what. Oh, you can be the comic relief!" Miranda smirked.

"That's Shepard" Trev laughed.

"Point. She and Vakarian can share it"

"Commander," the quartermaster presented them with their supplies, the unaffiliated human eyeing hungrily the bandolier of grenades, "Here you go."

"Thank you lieutenant" Trev nodded.

"Good luck out there"

"You too" the former templar nodded and returned the salute.

With their task done the two women made their way back to the central command building, walking beside the huge barricade that had been erected to keep the reapers at bay. So far there had been only husks attacking and not one of the big actual reapers, but the whole place was in a sorry state nonetheless.

The soldiers manning the barricade seemed tires and their faces were sunken and blank, no doubt part of the original Earth forces that stayed behind. As they spotted the Normandy badge some of them seemed to perk up if only a little bit, hoping against hope that the crew of commander Shepard
and the hero herself would pull off a miracle for the third time.

In turn the couple's gazes were fixed to the blindingly white beam in the distance, easily spotted though the lingering darkness. Seeing it in person was infinitely more daunting than simply hearing the plan – they needed to reach it, and it was so far away, though about five miles of reaper-controlled territory.

"If the situation was different it would almost be beautiful" Miranda remarked softly, admiring the way the beam illuminated the stormy sky.

"It almost looks as a passage to the heavens," Trev nodded, "Instead it leads to a place that has seen so much death. Not just all the people on it when it was captured, but millennia before – cycle upon cycle of death."

"Not ours" the biotic hummed, "Not yet at least."

"Hm"

Miranda arched an eyebrow at the strange tone "What is it?"

Trev looked down sheepishly "I… well. I don't think I would've been sent here if we were to die and the cycle would begin anew."

The brunette frowned minutely but stayed silent, as she often did when Trevelyan's faith was brought up. Then she smirked "Maybe you are to survive only to be the progenitor of the human race for the next cycle?"

"Right. Send a lesbian to do that" Trev rolled her eyes but chuckled as well.

Miranda shrugged "Good, because you're mine and I don't share well."

"I know, a certain dessert incident comes to mind"

"It was strawberry shortcake"

"Riiight. So my fault that you nearly broke my fingers"

"Don't exaggerate, I just tapped you with a spoon"

"You whacked me and you know it"

"You should've know better"

"Humph. See if I share my rations with you now"

"Prune-flavored cardboard? How ever shall I live?"

"Like the bars they issue biotics are any better. Speaking of, I'm hungry, is there a mess hall or something?"

It turned out it was – smelly and cramped but it did have food, both dextro and levo for the occasion of the assault. Both Garrus and Tali seemed to have a similar idea because they were already there, talking quietly in one of the corners. They seemed quite close, too close actually, so Trev and Miranda with only an exchanged look chose a different spot.

The meals were consumed quickly and the only thing left to do was wait on Shepard's call. Seeing as
Miranda seemed content to just lean on her with her eyes closed, Trev did much the same as she sent out prayer after prayer to Andraste, Maker, or pretty much anyone that would be willing to listen. She was _washappy_ and very much not ready to lose that.

"Lyn? Evelyn?"

"Mmm?" the former templar opened her eyes, shaken from her reverie.

"It's time" Miranda said, mouth tightening.

True to her words the general hustle and bustle seemed to have reached its climax and all soldiers were quickly finishing a rushing off. Trev frowned and checked her omni-tool "Shepard called?"

"Not yet, but it won't be long"

As if on cue both omni-tools pinged. Trev sighed and slowly stood up, stretching lightly. After a quick check of their gear they went back to the command center.

The whole makeshift camp was making final preparations, nearly all of them participating in the ground assault. The only exception was the hospital and its staff along with some guards. This was it, the finale of the campaign – should they fail, the whole cycle would be lost. The grimness of the atmosphere reflected that. But there was hope – all they needed was a single person, one person to make it into the Citadel in good enough shape to open its arms. Then it was up to fate since nobody truly knew what effect the Crucible would have.

Just before entering the 'briefing room', aka the room with least rubble, Miranda stopped abruptly and pushed Trev against the nearest wall to connect their lips in a harsh and demanding kiss.

"For luck" the brunette smirked at the dazed noble and entered first.

When Trev regained her senses she scrambled after her, making her the last of the Normandy ground team to arrive. Shepard shot her a knowing grin "Ok, now that we are all here, let's move onto the plan. Which is simple. We go to the beam and enter. That's it."

"Somehow I doubt that" Tali crossed her arms.

The commander waved her hand dismissively "And we kill all reapers in our path, obviously. For the big ones we have tanks so while those fire we protect them. Some of them are mounted with Thanix cannons so that should work, even the _reeee_ _big_ _one_ that is guarding the beam should go down. But they must reach – for that we not only guard them with all that we have but also follow the clearest paths. Well, relatively. All battalions and subsequent squads are given a vector which they should follow that should lead them into position."

Shepard took a deeper breath and continued "Our dwindling numbers have been taken into account. At least one squad should remain to guard their tank until it fires on our target."

"How many squads per tank?" Miranda asked.

"About five. Plus sweepers in front and a rear guard"

"We are to be sweepers?" Trev asked.

Garrus smirked "What? Not good enough for Lady Trevelyan. Used to having servants doing that for you?"
"As a matter of fact, yes" the blonde said imperiously.

Tali seemed to grin behind her visor "Oh good cheerleader, you get to be the little wifey and pick up after your dearest."

"Right, like my dearest isn't whipped" Miranda said dryly.

"And just how literally? Because I can picture it" Garrus smirked.

Shepard nodded sagely "She already has the boots for it."

Trev rolled her eyes even as a blush made its way onto the noble's cheeks "How about we continue the debriefing? Wouldn't want to be late."

"Nah, that was pretty much it. Only that our little company is 'Victor' squad – called dibs on it" Shepard grinned, "Oh and we get to march down the fancy shopping district. Hope you brought money along because that stuff in expensive."

"We might get a discount since it's all covered in dust, rubble and corpses" Miranda latched onto the topic that wasn't her sex life.

"Might even find you some sensible shoes" Tali looked at the operative's footwear.

The brunette rolled her eyes "My shoes are perfectly appropriate."

"For a dungeon" Shepard smirked.

Trevelyan cleared her throat "How about you give us some sort of speech and we go find the rest of 'Victor', hm?"

"Speech?" the commander's eyes widened considerably.

"Yes?" Liara arched an eyebrow.

"Oh goodie"

The asari cocked her head "I was told you had an excellent speech before the attack on the Collector base."

"Did you talk to Grunt?" Shepard asked with suspicion.

"He was one of my sources, yes. But not the only one"

The commander looked at the rest of her squad who immediately started either looking at the ceiling or the floor, with one case of innocent whistling.

Shepard snorted "Alright. Then maybe I can dust it off. OK, here it goes. Soldiers!"

Her squad saluted.

"Don't die!"

"Aye-aye!" all of them chorused before chuckling or outright laughing.

"Not bad" Liara smiled.

"Right!" Garrus clapped enthusiastically.
Miranda hummed pensively "I don't know, copies always lack something."

"Kai Leng would agree, I mean those clones of his?" Tali snorted derisively, "The original was better."

"True. I also like originals better, so if you please" Trev smiled brilliantly.

"You want another of my brilliant speeches?" Shepard sighed.

"Yep"

"Gimme a minute"

"Anderson to Shepard"

The red-head sighed in relief and replied immediately "Shepard here."

"Move your butt and get into position, we're about to start and I got frantic calls from some Lieutenant Kota that you are missing"

"Ooops"

"Yes. Ooops. Let's go!"

"We're there in a blink. Sorry sir"

"Gossiping like housewives I bet. I know you Shepard"

"You know, speeches to make, morale to raise..." the red-head trailed out as she speed-walked after her squad that was trying hard not to snicker.

"I understand. Nonetheless..."

"We're almost there, I swear"

"I'm sure. Anderson out"

"Someone's in trooouble" Garrus sing-songed.

"Yeah, you if you don't speed up and some lieutenant Kota the snitch" Shepard narrowed her eyes.

Miranda arched an eyebrow "Hardly his fault if his commander was nowhere to be found."

Trev grinned "I bet he almost had a stroke that he somehow displaced commander fucking Shepard."

"No wonder he called the admiral" Liara nodded with a smirk.

Shepard just huffed at that. And then again when they actually met lieutenant Kota. Well, or a man who practically melted with relief at the sight of them and kept mumbling 'thank god' over and over again.

Despite whet Kota and Anderson made seem, they actually had to wait a good while more before the admiral gave the order to move out. Nonetheless this time the squad stayed mostly in silence, instead choosing to spend their time checking and rechecking their gear for what seemed the tenth time today.

Finally the order came. The Normandy ground team and several others team immediately started
marching while the tank and other squads stayed behind for their own go ahead.

It soon became clear why the reaper ground forces haven't really tried to mount a big offensive to the organics' camp – they didn't really need to. As all the sweepers stepped forward, the reapers eagerly greeted them. No more sieges, no more guerilla tactic, this was a full on assault where both armies clashed and died without much fanfare. To press on was the only goal. To kill. To reach their destination no matter the cost. The tanks that slowly rode forward had to go over both rubble and corpses of both allies and enemies. It was a gruesome sight but unfortunately nothing new for London, still, they trudged forward.

The shopping district that Victor had to go through unsurprisingly had many shops, even if their good were either burned or unrecognizable on the floor. The shop windows were long gone but that and all the counters and maze-like layouts for optimal spending were now plentiful cover and ambush spots – something both sides sought to use. Biotics was particularly handy in those quarters, as were grenades. On the other hand brutes and banshees were far deadlier than usual.

When the squad wasn't indoors, relatively speaking, several harvesters started stirring up trouble. The dragons immediately indentified the tank as the biggest threat and went right for it. The guards as well as the tanks itself made a lot of damage to the beasts but those were relentless, only succumbing when the surviving armed shuttles came to help.

And then there was the comms. "Kilo company rerouted". "Charlie company has been taken out". "Echo requesting help." It went on and on, rarely with good news. Victor itself was having quite a lot of trouble to deal with also, getting rerouted twice as the reapers collapsed buildings or roads to slow the tank down.

Finally one company, Able, reported that they have broken through and were in position. Able had one of the thanix cannons so all soldiers that could hear the news held their breath, waiting on the next update – will they succeed in taking down their biggest obstacle on the way to the beam?

"Any effect?" came the voice of major Coats.

"Negative, something is messing with our guidance!" was the despaired reply, "We fired all missiles, no damage! It already took out half of our company in one shot!"

"Bravo is almost there, hold on!"

"What about us?" Shepard turned to Miranda.

The operative frowned as she reloaded her submachine gun "Able and Bravo are far west from here, going there would be stupid."

"I know and I wasn't asking that. I meant how far from our target position" Shepard rolled her eyes before she blurred in one of her patented charges.

"Not far. If we don't get rerouted again, we should get there shortly"

"Shepard!" came the panicked voice of lieutenant Kota though comm priority, "They flanked us and are attacking the tank!"

"We're coming, hold on!" the commander answered immediately and turned to Miranda that was already choosing another exit from the department store they were currently cleaning of reapers.

They needed to double back but they arrived just in time to see Kota's blood splattered all over the tank that was trying in vain to target the banshee that drove a hand though him. The rest of the guard
portion of Victor was dead, instead part of the rear guard and one other sweeper squads were bravely holding off the enemy.

Shepard didn't lose any time and charged while Miranda and Liara primed target for her. The rest targeted the shielded enemies and started diligently working on stripping them of that defense. The banshee was left for last even as she caused carnage on every flash.

When it was finally time to tackle the biotic husk only few people were still on their feet. The rear guard were mostly civilians in some capacity – mercenaries or just militia – and it showed as they were the first to fall. The sweepers were usually more experienced and better equipped but the reapers didn't discriminate and dealt death to any that came close. In the end it was about ten people alone that defended the tank when all enemies were defeated.

"We better stick with the tank now" Garrus stated the obvious when they all had time to breathe again.

"Yeah" Shepard didn't even make a smart comment, "Miranda, our route?"

"Pretty much straight ahead until we see the reaper"

"Should I report we are delayed?"

"It's not far" Miranda shrugged as they got confirmation that three more companies reached their destination as well as two more being wiped out.

"Shepard, I got an idea" Tali spoke up, "About the targeting issue all tanks seem to have."

"I'm listening"

"We could use Xen's targeting laser on the big reaper and replace the missile's targeting that way. We know it worked on a reaper before" the quarian explained.

"You have brought it along?" Shepard perked up.

"You know quarians, we never throw stuff away"

"Grand! Did Xen make more? Do other quarians have it with them?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But probably not"

"Then we need to reach our destination fast and do the targeting ourselves" Trev said and turned to the rest of their company to hurry up.

Shepard nodded and went to inform major Coats whose relief was clear even over the comm as the engineers haven't been able to solve the issue and their numbers were dwindling fast.

"Banshees!" Liara shouted in warning.

"Brute charging" Garrus chimed in weakly.

"Him first! He can't wreck the tank!"

All guns flashed yellow as they all set the armor-piercing mod and stood ground as the biotics sent warps as fast as they could manage.

With the concentrated fire the brute went down easy enough, but in the time it took them to do
exactly that the other troops including the two banshees came perilously close. Close enough that Liara got caught in a biotic warp that ate though her armor like cake.

Trev rushed to the asari's rescue and tore the quickly disintegrating chest plate and arms off, leaving Liara with only her under-armor shirt as protection.

While the former templar stood over the downed teammate with her shield and pistol, the banshees made quick work of two more of Victor before Shepard managed to take one out while the tank took out the other with its secondary guns.

The red-head rushed to her ex-girlfriend as soon as the last enemy hit the ground "Liara!"

"I'm alright, I just needed to rest a little bit. Thank you Trevelyan" the asari thanked both for the protection and the arm that helped her up.

"Shit, your armor" Shepard said in worry.

One of the remaining soldiers of the company cleared his throat loudly "Dax was of similar proportions. She... she will not need it any more."

Shepard looked at the merc and then at one of the bodies near him "Thank you."

"Dax would be ecstatic" the merc snorted sadly, "She always loved asari if you catch my drift."

"Thank you" Liara said to him as well, watching Shepard gently strip the body.

"I think we'll get to relay that message to Dax real soon in person anyway" the merc shrugged.

Miranda checked her omnitool and focused her visor "Or maybe not. Only a few hundred meters and we're in position. We can take the reaper out."

"We'll see" the merc shrugged once more and went to loot the bodies of his other downed friends.

Soon the tank was on the move again, its once more reduced escort jogging along, eyes peeled for any more reapers.

In the end they didn't need such focus as the only reaper they spotted was very visible indeed – the destroyer class reaper that guarded the beam.

"We're here" Miranda announced.

Shepard nodded "Tali, take out that targeting, I'll contact Coats. Rest of you, guard. We need this to work, really really need it."

"Tali, are you alright?" Garrus asked worriedly as he surveyed the quarian.

"Yes"

"Tali?" Shepard's frown was clear in her voice.

The engineer sighed as she readied the laser "My suit got punctured a while back. I might be getting a fever even despite the antibiotics my suit pumped into me."

"What! We need to do something" Garrus exclaimed.

"I did" Tali shrugged, "I put on a temporary patch and started treatment. Not much else anyone can
do in the field."

"We can't evac" Liara bit her lip.

"Yes, that's why I told you everything's fine. I'll get treated once this is over. And that a cue for you Shepard, call Coats, we need to put this bosh'tet down"

The Spectre nodded reluctantly and brought her hand to her ear to do exactly that. Coats immediately ordered all thanix missile batteries to sync to the targeting laser as that the one barrage would be enough. If it worked then all that was left was husks and a clear run to the beam.

"Ready" Tali announced.

After a moment Coats confirmed "We're ready. All companies, FIRE!"

Victor's missiles were the first to go off and they went right onto the reaper, right into his firing chamber. The destroyers stumbled in response, its front plates damaged and hanging semi-open. That was where the second barrage struck. Then another and another.

"It's going down!" Coats threw away his stoicism as he shouted jubilantly.

The reaper falling was a magnificent sight, one that had everybody shout in victory and pure elation.

"We did it. We really did!"

"Anderson to all Hammer. Damn fine job!" the admiral's voice took over the comm, "Gather onto the new coordinates. It's time we finished this. Anderson out."

"You heard the man" Shepard said, suddenly more energized, "Let's go."

"We could ride atop the tank, it's real far and I don't fancy walking" the merc that donated his friend's armor spoke up, "It can hold seven."

"Seven?" Trev frowned and looked around.

"Yeah" the merc nodded, "Apart from your team, I'm last man standing. Not counting the tank driver and shooters."

"What about us? Status?" Shepard asked.

"Nearly out of ammunition but no injuries" Trev reported.

"Exhausted and hungry" Miranda sighed.

Liara seemed hesitant but relented "My ribs aren't in perfect shape to be honest."

"I think the antibiotics are winning" Tali shrugged.

Shepard cocked her head to the side and prompted the last member of her team when he didn't speak up "Garrus?"

"Hm? Oh. Yes, I'm good. I was just thinking what dextro medicine I have but it's not much" the turian briefly caught Tali's gaze and then looked down.

"I have everything I need to treat a suit puncture, thank you very much" Tali said pointedly.
"And you?" Shepard addressed the merc loudly, hoping to forestall any argument among her team.

"Just dandy"

"Good. And yes, we can ride the tank"

"It has a weight limit, you know" the tank's pilot radioed in.

"You want to imply I'm fat?" Shepard put her arms on her hips.

"No ma'am" was the hasty reply.

"Good. Everybody, mount up. And be on alert for more reapers"

Without the added weight of the missiles, as well as the needed caution with the powerful weapons, the tank's speed was nearly double, enough for the new passengers to hold on tightly lest they fall off.

During this journey no reapers seemed to bother them so they arrived at the rendezvous point in short order, maybe just a little car-sick. That afforded them prime view of a few enormous reapers fast approaching, heading right to the beam.

"Anderson! New reapers are arriving in, we need to go right now!" Shepard shouted into her comm.

"Anderson to Hammer, all units make a break for the beam. Hackett reports that several Sovereign-class reapers have broken off from the battle with Sword. They are coming here. Everybody, be fast!"

The driver didn't let the admiral finish and gunned it, making the squad hold even more tightly.

It seemed just a few seconds when they all spotted red and Miranda shouted "Everybody off!"

The Normandy squad didn't hesitate and let themselves roll over the sides of their transport, falling hard to the ground. The harsh impact was nothing compared to what the tank and the merc they picked up suffered.

"Scatter and RUN!" Shepard ordered as they scrambled to stand up, slipping on the muddy terrain.

What followed wasn't dignified or graceful, it was simply a desperate run. Several other members of Hammer joining them on the last stretch of bare land with no cover. It was just run and hope. Some were on foot and some in transports but those were quickly targeted by the reaper lasers.

As they have fallen off their transport on different sides and were simply diverse in speed the whole Normandy team broke up, quickly losing sight of each other as they concentrated simply on the white before them.

Trevelyan caught a glimpse of Liara faltering for a moment but then her gaze was drought to her fiancée that had to throw herself to the side and roll under a transport that was thrown by the reaper's laser.

"Miranda!"

The brunette waved off any concern but accepted the hand before it was time to run again.

Zig-zag. Not to get caught.
Run to the beam.

Ignore the dead, just press forward.

To the beam.

The laser tore right though the ground right before them, the soldiers that were running faster than the two women practically vaporized. Trev slid though mud to catch herself and maneuver into another direction, her heavy armor boosting inertia. Miranda had an easier time but her white armor was unrecognizable after she rolled several times in the mud.

About half-way though another transport was caught by the reaper and this time it wasn't thrown but it exploded. Sharp shards of metal and plastic flew through the air in all directions while the explosion made them turn their eyes away.

Trevelyan didn't really understand why her knees buckled and she was already on the ground. A pain in her stomach made her look down. "Oh."

A heavy shard penetrated the heavy armor like it was nothing and lodged itself right into Trevelyan's gut. The blonde touched with trembling hands the blood that was starting to seep though before both hands were slapped away by Miranda "Medigel, medigel. Shit! You're out!" Miranda cursed and shook her head to help her focus "Here, just let me…"

Trev blinked several times, her mind trying to comprehend what just happened. The pain that shot though her as Miranda applied what was left of her already depleted supply brought everything into focus. She caught the brunette's hand "No, you have to go. We have a mission."

"I can't"

"This is important, you…"

"I mean I can't," Miranda stressed the word, "Don't tell Tali, but I guess she was right about the shoes."

"What?" Trev frowned in confusion.

"I think on this last evasive maneuver I broke something. Or badly sprained"

"What?" Trev reiterated but this time she chuckled. That chuckle soon morphed into full blown laughter.

"You are going into shock" Miranda said sadly and helped her lover so that the noble could lay her head into her lap and a better access to her wound.

"Maybe" Trev admitted. Then she turned as serious as she's ever been "You need to get out of here, you can do that on one leg."

The brunette took off Trev's visor as well as her own and started stroking the muddy hair in her lap "I don't think that is going to work."

"And why not" the Andrastian asked angrily, causing her blood to come more freely.

"That laser is shooting everywhere, might as well stay put. More dignified and my odds are about the same"

"I recognize you are far better at mathematics and statistics than I could ever be, but I call bullshit"
Miranda chuckled "Maybe you are the smart one after all."

The reaper laser hit a running squad so very near the two women, spaying them with dirt and blood. The ground shaking making Trev grit her teeth as sharp pain shot through her from her abdomen. She felt herself getting weaker by each passing second, even the assorted explosions and screams weren't as clear as they were before, and Miranda's ministrations were so calming.

"Hey! Stay with me!" the brunette said sharply.

Trev opened her eyes, not realizing she had closed them "I'm here. But you really shouldn't be."

Miranda ignored her "You heard the radio?"

"What?"

"They brought the Crucible out. It's there, waiting. Someone certainly made it, it will be over soon"

"That's good. What about Shepard? The rest?"

"I have no idea"

"Ah. They made it. I'm certain of it"

"Shepard certainly is tenacious" Miranda chuckled.

"mmm"

"Don't you dare fall asleep on me" The brunette said menacingly, "You know enough about my past lovers to know I hate that."

The next "mmm" was touch more amused.

"Shit"

"mmm?"

"The rest of Hammer is pulling back. They're not even sure if anybody made it. We were wiped out"

"They made it" Trev said with effort.

"I know"

Miranda spoke some more but it was getting harder and harder to concentrate. The noble was still aware but she couldn't really distinguish words anymore. It was just like that moment just before waking up, still half in a dream but not asleep either.

It must've been some time later but she really couldn't tell, when she heard Miranda above her gasp. Then a wave of brilliant green light illuminated everything, even through her closed eyes. It reminded of Fade but there was not the same smell, not the same feel. Something different. Something altogether different.

"They're leaving! Lyn, please, open your eyes! They're leaving! Please, Lyn, this must be it. You need to hold on! Please my love!"

"mmm" Trev replied with her last strength.
AN: Who survived and who didn't is matter of the epilogue

AN2: Damn this was hard. I really rushed to finish it but I am reasonably happy with it. Thoughts?
One year later

EDI watched with amusement as Trev and Miranda were searching for the blonde's dress uniform. Well, Trev was searching in mild panic while her wife indulged her, mildly irritated that she was dragged from her work.

The Trevelyans' relationship was always a point of interest for her – she observed it from the very beginning and that didn't really stop. At first it was a curiosity, another facet of human emotion she could not really grasp but she filed it away nonetheless. When Trev had called a friend for the first time, her interest about her affairs grew, after all that was what friends did. She read it on the extranet. She herself continued evolving until she actually felt close to the former templar and she began being invested. Her talks with Trev and Shepard helped, answered many of her questions but not all, and observation had always been her forte. Miranda she had considered an interesting external factor and was puzzled by her friend's response, her sensors were could pick up everything no matter how good a poker face. It was a friendship first, she could see the parallels to her own relationship with the noble. She only got secondhand information about how friendship morphed into something more from their messages while she was for all intents and purposes in Alliance custody. Even when such a crucial piece missing she continued observing and it was fascinating. Especially in contrast to Shepard dealing with her former flame and then with her developing romance with Traynor.

Fascinating. Humans, organics, were fascinating. She understood quite a lot after observing them for so long but now? Now she understood. The Crucible changed everything for her and even if it was unsettling at first, she couldn't imagine going back.

"What are you thinking about?" Sam chuckled form beside her.

"That our hosts should have a better laundry system" EDI answered with a broad grin, eyes sparking with green.

Traynor laughed "Yes indeed. But since they have graciously allowed us to stay with them while on Earth, I think we should refrain from mentioning it."

"Should I also not mention the uniform in question is actually in the guest room we are occupying?"

"EDI, you fiend" the comm specialist grinned.

The AI shrugged "I guess if they don't find it I'll tell them tomorrow, before the ceremony."

"Synthesis Day" Sam rolled her eyes, "Could've done better with the name."

"So much has happened, I imagine it had been hard choosing an appropriate designation"

"Point. Although even if I know Shepard would've hated something like 'Shepard's Day' I think she should've been incorporated more"

EDI hummed "She was a hero and now she became a legend. I think she would appreciate that at least the name isn't so on the nose."
"I guess" Traynor said sadly.

This was one of the things, or pretty much the only thing, that EDI hated about her newfound understanding of organics – the crushing feeling when someone she cared about was sad or disappointed. Well, only Sam. Sam, was… well, after their three-month stint cut off from everybody when the Relays were destroyed, they got close. Her best friend currently onboard, even before Jeff. It was her that consoled the specialist when she was told the news about her loved when they got towed back to civilization. They still worked together, saw each other every day. And it was then that EDI realized just how much things changed for her. EDI once more looked at the arguing Trev and Miranda and sighed, this time not in amusement but envy. "How are you doing?"

Sam snorted "You mean like one year to the day my girlfriend died and changed the fate of billions? Peachy."

EDI looked down "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry" the specialist put a hand on her friend's shoulder, "I'm just processing. Still, I know."

"You should take as much time as you need to grieve and let nobody tell you otherwise" the AI said sharply.

Sam smiled "I know, but thank you. It means a lot. It's just… you know, it wasn't a break-up. Nobody got dumped. She died. And to be perfectly honest I am a little bit pissed about that. She just goes and dies. Because commander fucking Shepard had to be the hero."

"It's not…"

"I know, I know. I don't mean it really - I mean we are all alive because of her. Doesn't mean I'm not pissed though"

"Alright"

"Could use a hug though" Sam batted her eyelashes.

EDI chuckled and opened her arms "Very well."

"AHA!"

"Told you Evelyn. Now can I please go back to my work? The lab has sent some new findings and they are far more interesting than your treasure hunt for a uniform that was, please note my shock, in a closet"

"Ha, but the guest room closet! Totally different"

"Yes, dear"

Sam chuckled but didn't step back from the hug "I'm glad those two survived and got married. Something utterly mundane among all the change."

EDI nodded and relished in the prolonged contact "Yes. Though from what I heard Trev almost didn't make it. Sheer luck and good timing, that's what Miranda said."

"Hmm. Garrus said Tali got really lucky too, that it was really close. Speaking of them, I'm looking forward to seeing Tali without her suit. I thought it would take years"

"Well, our knowledge level skyrocketed after synthesis, the species of last cycles helped in every
Sam finally ended the hug and beamed "Yes, it's still amazing even after a year! I mean we almost reconstructed everything and far surpassed it in some cases. And I can't wait till Polis is finished. I saw the designs and it looks far better than the Citadel ever could. It helps that this one isn't an enemy construct though."

"Indeed"

"So this is where you're hiding" Trev startled them.

"Hardly hiding" EDI rolled her eyes.

"Just like you were not hiding my uniform?" the noble smirked.

"Not our fault you forgot where you put it"

Traynor laughed "Besides, don't tell me you didn't do it just so you could drag Miranda from work for a bit."

"I'd like to say that but no, I really couldn't find it" Trev cleared her throat uncomfortably, "But it was a welcome bonus. I mean she was always a workaholic but with all those new things she really took it to a new level. Can't blame her though, it is rather fascinating stuff. Plus she's really happy so…"

"I agree! Just a year ago QEC technology was cutting-edge, now? Nearly obsolete. Well, it will be once we can adapt…"

"Please" Trev whined, "Later? I already listened to something similar today."

"Sure" Sam laughed.

"Is Oriana coming to the ceremony tomorrow?" EDI changed the subject.

"She is" the blonde grinned, "With her booooyfriend. Can't wait to see how Miranda reacts. And it will be great to see Garrus and Tali again."

"And Liara?" Sam cocked her head to the side.

Trev shrugged with a sigh "I have no idea. I saw her at the hospital when I was recovering but then she just disappeared. I know she survived and she sent me congratulations on our wedding, but nothing since."

"I tried to contact her as well but got no reply" Sam frowned.

"She did have hermit tendencies" EDI shrugged.

"Well, as long as she's alright" Trev nodded uneasily.

After a beat of collective pensive silence Sam's head shot up "That reminds me I need to call Hackett about something."

In a moment the specialist was gone and Trev arched an eyebrow "How did that remind her of Hackett?"

"I have given up on trying to understand people" EDI shrugged.
"Probably smart. Oh, while I have you alone – did you make any progress?" the blonde's eyes twinkled, a green spark flashing briefly.

"On what?" was the dry reply.

"You know"

EDI rolled her eyes but replied "She's mourning Shepard."

"I understand that, just saying you could still make a little bit of progress. Besides, she was attracted to you even before she ever met Shepard" 

"She just thought my voice was 'hot'"

"Last I checked your voice didn't change"

"So how is your speech coming?" EDI blatantly changed the subject.

Trev sighed but let it go, knowing full well how being pressed on matters of romance was irritating "I have it. Although I don't know why I have to speak."

"Hackett will be speaking on behalf of humanity, but you were Shepard's second in command so you will speak about her"

"I still think Garrus should do it"

"He won the coin toss"

"Bastard"

EDI smirked at that but shrugged "I hope the following years the celebration will change. Shepard would love it being a party."

"True. And it probably will – this first one is special"

The AI nodded. Then she hummed and cocked her head to the side "So what's next for Commander and Doctor Trevelyan?"

Trev glanced at the doors to the room her spouse was currently occupying "Miranda has been mentioning a kid a lot. Something that more than mildly terrifies me."

"There have been perfectly safe births and normal children after synthesis"

"That's not what terrifies me, although that is indeed great news"

"Well, we do need a population boom" EDI smirked.

"Right, exactly the reason to do it" the blonde rolled her eyes.

"I think little Trev would be adorable"

"Please don't" big Trev whined.

"Why? We both know you can't say no to your beloved"

"That I can't. But I'm perfectly comfortable with 'maybe later'"
"..."
"..."

"Are you really?"

"Hmph"

"So let's discuss names"

"EDI!"

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Centuries or millennia from now there even might be some star child that would learn of "the Shepard" and the day on which everything changed. The great war would be little more than a story, a tale of great heroes.

But that is too abstract.

Everything that will have led to that hypothetical moment where the child would ask for this tale, is more tangible. More real. It requires hard work of real people, times of conflict and times of calm, life.

But I guess a good story is not bad either.

And the story of commander fucking Shepard is a damn good one.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand that's all folks.

I chose synthesis because I just couldn't let EDI die. So did Shepard. I mean we saw her grow a lot during ME2 and ME3 and I especially loved writing her. That is also why I decided to make the epilogue a little bit about her.

So that's it.

The end.

Loved writing it and I hope you have enjoyed reading it. Thank you for all your reviews, favorites and follows, on ffnet and here too I hope, and I hope to see you in some other story.

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